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"Bring me hot coffee and six-shooters for two."

YES, Suh, rannies and gals, that was the order the celebrated bad-man cowboy, Clay Allison, give in a restaurant in the little Mexican town o' Cimarron, New Mexico, back in the year 1873. A fiesta, with horse racin', was goin' on in the village, with lots o' drinkin' and roisterin', as usual.

A cowboy called "Chunk" had been heard to threaten to kill Clay Allison on sight, and when Allison heard o' the boast he started out to find Chunk pronto. Learnin' that he was in the little restaurant, Allison boldly entered. Stridin' directly to the table where the cowboy sat, he sat down opposite Chunk, then gave his famous order to the waiter.

The Concealed Pistol

Now the cowboy "Chunk" had a reputation as a killer hisself, but compared with Clay Allison he was a rank amateur. He didn't realize how he was out-matched by intelligence, cold darin', and shootin' ability. And a whole lot o' his courage sprang from the liquor he'd been consumin' for several days. He thought he was smart. He'd taken the precaution, when he'd sat down to his meal, to spread his napkin across his knees to conceal the pistol he'd placed there ready for instant action.

When Allison marched in and sat opposite Chunk and give his famous order, the bravado with the gun on his knees understood what the bold, keen-eyed Allison meant, all right. His hand dropped to his lap and flashed up with his Colts, but he wasn't fast enough, at that. A bullet from Allison's pistol struck him squarely between the eyes.

The result was that Clay Allison was exonerated for the killin' o' Chunk, as it was proved that the cowboy had his gun in his hand when shot.

He Was Born Lucky

Like I said, Allison's killin's were always proved legal; he planned 'em cleverly, though he often took law into his own hands and twisted it to suit hisself. Then, too, he was born lucky that way, seemed like.

Who was Clay Allison?

Judgin' by his appearance he was a fine lookin' fellah, polite and generally gentlemanly in his manner. Usually he wore a pleasant smile on his handsome face when not on the prod, and he stood 6 foot 2 in his stocking feet. Weight about 175 pounds.

His twinklin' blue eyes could become very piercin' in their direct gaze, in an instant, they say. His handclasp was strong and friendly, and, altogether, with his shinin' black chin-beard, moustache, and hair he made a strikin', agreeable appearance when meetin' up with people. Add to the rest, he was the type that frequently "set 'em up" to every one in a saloon.

There was one other thing that made him stand out from others in appearance. He was crippled in one foot, and limped slightly, frequently usin' his Winchester for a crutch. He'd been struck in the foot years before by a bullet accidentally discharged from his own pistol.

The Craving for Adventure

His wrists were larger than his hands, too. And he could wriggle out o' any knot that was tied about 'em. Once he saved his own

life in that way when he was captured as a spy by the Union Army and tied up to await execution.

He had joined the Confederate Army while a boy in his teens, enlistin' from his home in Tennessee. It was in this war that he learned to kill—and he liked the excitement of it, I reckon.

After the war between the states was over he went West to seek his fortune, and to satisfy a cravin' for action and adventure.

He ran a cattle ranch south o' Las Animas, Colorado, for a spell, after he'd been workin' some years as a cowboy. His cattle ranged south as far as the Cimarron River in New Mexico. It was durin' those years that he won his reputation as a killer o' bad men. Some say he killed eighteen in all; others claim it was only twelve.

Later, he owned and operated a small cattle ranch on Gageby Creek, which is one o' the tributaries to the Washita River in the Indian Territory, now the state o' Oklahoma.

A Way with the Law

Like I said, he had a way with the law and took his liberties. Once Sheriff Rhinehart o' New Mexico went to a ranch to arrest him for murder. Allison, cool as you please, asked to see the warrant. When Rhinehart handed it to him he tore it up, then jerked the sheriff's hat from his head, filled it with dirty water from the creek and slapped it back on.

"Now hit the road to Cimarron!" he ordered. This the sheriff promptly did, knowin' Allison's reputation as a killer.

Soon a company o' soldiers was sent out under a Lieutenant to bring Clay Allison to the county seat. Allison refused to surrender to the soldiers, tellin' the officer that he'd consent to ride with him alone to Cimarron, if the Lieutenant would send the troops on ahead. The Lieutenant agreed, and Allison was allowed to keep his firearms while ridin' in beside the officer. There was a trial, but Allison was again acquitted.

Death of a Town Marshal

On another occasion Allison and his brother John killed the town Marshal o' Las Animas. The two Allison brothers were in a dance hall one night when the town Marshal, Charles Faber, entered. He had a double-

(Continued on page 107)

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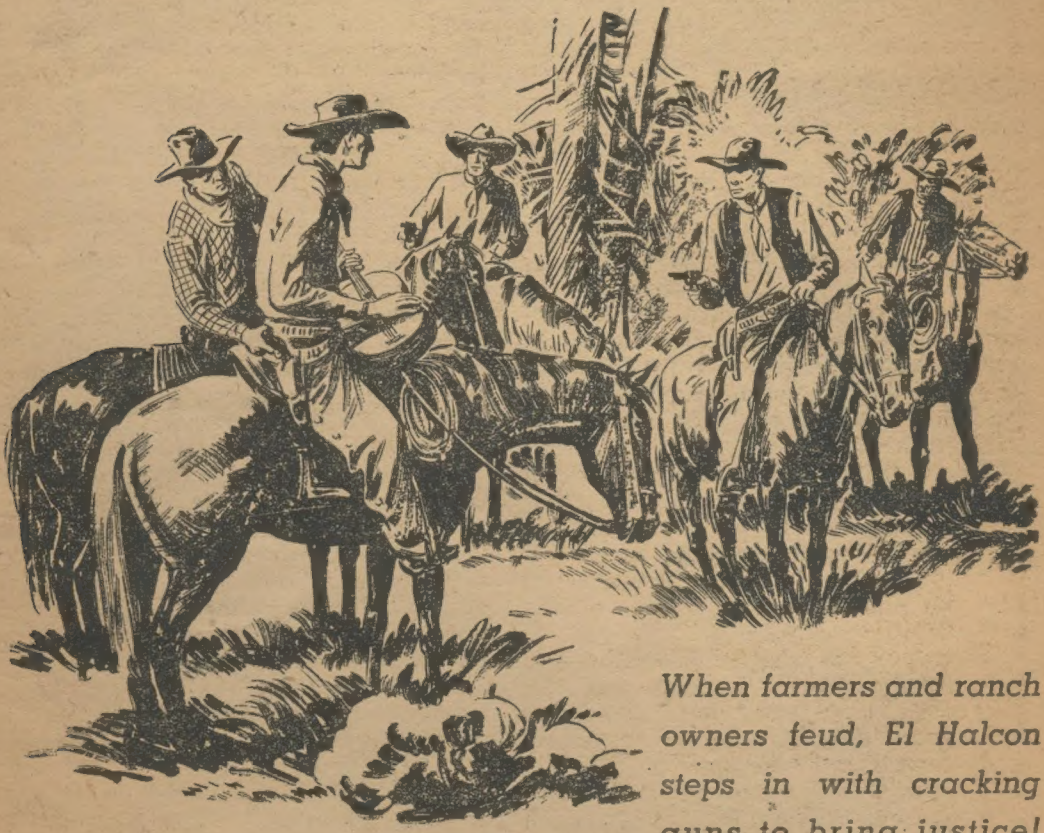


When farmers and ranch owners feud, El Halcon steps in with cracking guns to bring justice!

a texas ranger novelet by BRADFORD SCOTT

CHAPTER I

Texas Man

"THAT'LL be about far enough, cowboy!"

Walt Slade put the slightest pressure on the bridle of Shadow, his great black horse, and let the loosely knotted reins fall onto the black's sleek neck. Shadow instantly halted. With the thumbs of his slender, bronzed hands hooked over his double cartridge belts, Slade sat and regarded the man who barred his path.

The man was somewhat beyond middle age, lanky, tall, with a hard mouth and hard, watchful eyes. His face was deeply lined, his hair grizzled. In his hands he held a Winchester rifle. He held the rifle sloping across his chest in a sort of port arms position.

That rifle looked as if it meant business, but in reality, it might as well have been

on the other side of Texas for all the good it would have done that man in case of eventuality. He didn't know it, but before the blinding speed of the slender hands of the man the peons of the River villages had named *El Halcon* —the Hawk—he didn't have as much chance as a jack-rabbit in a hound dog's mouth.

Slade spoke, his long, black-lashed gray eyes flickering sideward an instant, toward where thick brush flanked the trail.

"What's the big notion?" he asked mildly. "Open trail, ain't it?"

"Not for cattle workers out to make trouble," the man replied with grim emphasis.

Slade looked more interested than perturbed. His hands did not move. In fact, he had no desire to go for his guns. He rather liked the steadiness with which the faded blue eyes of the old man in the trail met his.

"Don't reckon all cowhands are all the time out to make trouble for other folks," he observed, the corners of his rather wide mouth quirking upward a trifle. "I happen to be a stranger in this part of the country. What's all the fuss about?"

"Strangers are what us fellers have to look out for most," the man declared. "We're expectin' some hard characters to be brought in here by the cattlemen, to do their shootin' for 'em."

"That so?" Slade remarked. "Incidentally you might tell the feller in the brush over there to my left to stop hoppin' around. He's shakin' so hard the muzzle of his rifle is weavin' around like a snake's head stickin' out of tall grass. If he pulled trigger, he'd be just liable to plug you as me."

The man's eyes widened. His head thrust forward on his neck, he peered incredulously at the Hawk.

SUDDENLY Walt Slade smiled, the white, flashing smile of *El Halcon*. The little devils of laughter that always seemed to dance back in the depths of his gay, reckless eyes, came hopping to the front. And for the moment the gray eyes, that could on occasion be as cold as wind-swept winter ice, were all warmth and kindness.

A puzzled expression crossed the face of the man in the trail. His brows wrinkled querulously. Apparently forgetting all about his rifle, he raised one hand to his stubbly chin and rasped it vigorously with calloused fingers. Abruptly he tucked the rifle under his arm, turned his face to his right.

"Come on out, Pat," he called. "I've a notion this feller is all right."

There was a rustling in the growth. A figure stepped into view.

It was Walt Slade's turn to stare. The figure was small and slight, with wide brown eyes, sweetly curved red lips, soft, creamily tanned cheeks, and red-brown curls that clung tightly to a shapely head. In her slim hands the girl held a heavy rifle.

"Well, I'll be—be darned!" the Hawk exclaimed.

His eyes centered on the rifle, and danced with amusement.

"Ma'am," he said in his deep, musical voice, "when yuh take a notion to shoot a jigger, yuh don't want to keep your gun at half-cock. That's the safety position, yuh know. Yuh couldn't pull the trigger in a week of Sundays.

The girl flushed. "I—I don't know much about the things," she said, her voice as musical as Slade's own.

"So I noticed," *El Halcon* agreed drily. His gaze shifted to the old man, his eyes abruptly serious. "And as for you, feller," he said, "the next time yuh stop somebody on the trail in this country, have yore rifle against yore shoulder and the hammer all the way back. Otherwise, somethin's liable to happen to yuh, if the jigger in question happens to be the wrong sort. Watch close, now, and I'll show yuh."

The man and the girl both watched closely, but just the same neither could follow the blurring movement of Slade's hands. All they knew was that before they could draw a breath, they were looking into the black muzzles, rock-steady, of two long-barreled guns.

The guns spun a circle in the air, the handle smacking into Slade's palms, the

muzzles again yawning toward them. Then in the same flicker of motion the big Colts vanished into their sheaths. The whole procedure hadn't covered three ticks of the clock.

The astounded pair stared at him. The old man raised a shaking hand to his face and wiped away the sweat that had suddenly popped out on his cheeks.

WALT SLADE

"I—I reckon I wouldn't have had much chance, son," he said.

"No," Slade replied gravely, "yuh wouldn't." His expression abruptly became stern. "I figger a little explainin' is in order. This happens to be an open trail, used considerable, from the looks of it. There happens to be a law in this state that sort of objects to havin' folks held up at gun point and told not to travel any farther."

"There may be laws in this State—on the books—but us fellers hereabout ain't seen much of it workin'," the old man said bitterly.

Slade's interest deepened. "Just who are you fellers, and who's makin' trouble for yuh?" he asked.

"Me and Abner Sutton and Craig Flood are farmers," the old man explained. "I'm Jethro Hale, and this gal is my granddaughter, Pat."

"Patricia," the girl corrected.

Slade nodded. "Glad to know yuh both," he said. He supplied his own name, and asked, "yuh own land hereabout?"

"Yes," the oldster replied, "we do. All bought and paid for regular and above board. We got our titles from the State to land over here on the west side of Palermo Valley. This whole part of the country is what folks out here call open range, I understand."

"And cowmen are using it?" Slade asked.

"That's right," the old man said. "There are big ranches over to the east."

"That all open range, too?"

"Over to the land office they said not," declared Jethro Hale. "Them fellers own

their land over to the east. They claim this over here, but they don't own it."

"And object to you fellers comin' into the valley, eh?" Slade suggested.

"That's right. They call us nesters—fellers what just squat down on land any place without gettin' title. We ain't nesters. We bought our land, and paid for it."

I SEE." Slade nodded, his eyes serious. It was a situation with which he was familiar—big ranch owners claiming everything in sight, feeling that long tenancy gave them the right to dictate who should or should not use the land that was considered open range and their property, because they were "there first," and resenting any intrusion.

"Makin' of trouble here," he told himself.

He spoke to the old man.

"Yuh say yuh been havin' trouble, Hale? What sort of trouble?"

"Our fence has been cut," the old man replied. "Stock has been let in our fields to eat up and tromp down our crops. Abner Sutton had a stable set afire a month back. Somebody shot a hole through my hat while I was out in the field hoein'. Fellers ride past at night shootin' and yellin' and scarin' the daylights out of us. Yesterday some skunk stuck a note on my gate post that said for us to make ourselves scarce, 'cause a feller was comin' who'd shoot holes in all of us if he caught us hangin' around when he got here. That's why I was out here keepin' watch."

Slade nodded again. "That note sounds like some jigger was just havin' himself a mite of fun with yuh," he commented.

The oldster didn't seem impressed. "Mighty funny notion of fun," he growled. "I'll give him fun, if I catch him. Us fellers are from Kentucky, and we don't scare easy."

Slade chuckled. He had already arrived at that conclusion.

"Well"—he smiled—"I reckon yuh can be safe in figgerin' I'm not the feller the note told about."

"Nope," agreed Jethro Hale, "I don't reckon yuh aim to be." His wrinkled old face suddenly creased in a smile. "Sorry I talked the way I did," he apologized, "but I reckon I'm sort of jumpy. My little farmhouse is just around the bend. I'd take it proud if yuh'd stop off and have supper with me and my grand-daughter Pat."

Slade turned his glance to the girl, an amused light in his gray eyes. She colored a trifle under his regard, which made her piquant face even more attractive, Slade thought.

"I'd be glad, too, if you would," she said. "I feel we have been very rude to you."

"Oh, it wasn't a bad reception committee, especially the small half of it," Slade replied, his eyes dancing.

The girl's color deepened. "Stop making fun of us and come along and have supper," she said. "I can cook—a little."

"Best cook ever came out of Kentucky," grunted Jethro Hale. "Come along, son."

He tucked the rifle under his arm, turned and slouched toward the trail bend with the long, easy, loose-limbed stride of the mountaineer. Patricia, with a last glance at the tall Hawk, and with a dimple peeping out at one corner of her red lips, also turned and tripped lithely beside her grandfather.

Slade chuckled. He spoke to Shadow, and the big black ambled after the strangely assorted pair.

The trail curved gently. Gradually the growth thinned, fell away altogether, and the full view of Palermo Valley opened before Slade's eyes.

It was a splendid prospect, viewed from the apex of the curve, which was at a somewhat higher level than the valley floor. The great elliptical-shaped bowl was, Slade judged, a good fifty miles in length by perhaps thirty-five in width.

East, west and north it appeared to be walled by tall hills with precipitous, forest-clad lower slopes and craggy crests.

To the south were also hills, jagged of crest, but with a pass or opening of some ten miles in width apparently passing through them. This pass, which was about six miles south of where Slade sat his tall black horse, was considerably higher than the valley floor, with a fairly steep slope leading upward to its mouth.

Beyond the pass, Slade knew, some miles south of the south slope of the hills, ran the old Sonora Trail, once a

Slade let go with a rattling crash, and the owlhoot reeled as if struck by a mighty fist

widely travelled highway from east to west, and still used considerably. Farther beyond, was the Rio Grande and Mexico.

The valley was richly grass grown, dotted with groves and clumps of chaparral. There were sags and low rises. The hills to the east appeared to be fissured by numerous canyons. Slade observed considerable numbers of grazing cattle several miles to the east of the western hills, in whose shadow he sat his slowly pacing horse.

JUST beyond the apex of the curve, the trail forked. One branch turned due east to vanish into a distant grove. The other curved north and ran almost parallel to the western hills, veering somewhat to the east.

Marching along the edge of the trail were fence posts to which were strung strands of barbed wire. Between the first flanks of the western hills and the wire was a distance of perhaps three miles.

Directly ahead, the wire turned a corner and ran west toward the hills.

"That's my south fence," Jethro Hale observed, jerking his thumb toward the wire, which was some hundred yards distant. "And on ahead under the trees is my house."

Hale's farmhouse was a tightly built little structure of two stories, and boasted a veranda in front. It was new, not yet painted. His stable and other outbuildings were of similar construction. Beyond the house was the green of springing crops.

"Two miles up the valley is Abner Sutton's house," Hale said. "A couple of miles still farther is Craig Flood's. Craig ain't to home now. He went over east about three weeks back on some business."

He led the way through a gate in the east wire and entered the farmhouse yard.

"Come along," he told Slade, "and I'll help yuh put up yore hoss in the stable. Pat can get supper started."

Shadow received a comfortable stall and Slade made sure that the mount's wants were taken care of. Then he and Hale repaired to the house, where Pat was busy in the kitchen.

CHAPTER II

The Muggeltonians

BEFORE the meal the brown-eyed girl prepared and placed before him was finished, Slade was willing to admit that Jethro Hale had not exaggerated when he had declared Pat was the "best cook that ever came out of Kentucky." Full dark had descended when they repaired to the living room.

Old Jethro dragged out a black pipe and stuffed it with blacker tobacco. Slade rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hands, and the two smoked for some time in silence.

They had just begun to talk when Jethro suddenly cocked his ear toward the shuttered window. Slade had already heard the sound of fast hoofbeats approaching the farmhouse.

Swiftly the beats grew louder, then abruptly ceased. There was a jingling of bridle irons, a popping of saddle leather, then the clump of boots up the path that led to the veranda.

Jethro Hale leaped to his feet, turned toward where his rifle stood in a corner. But Slade stopped him.

"Take it easy," he cautioned. "Don't go off half-cocked. When them fellers knock, open the door and let 'em in. Then step well to one side."

As he spoke, Slade rose to his feet, swiftly crossed the room and stepped through an inner door to the dark dining room, where he could see and not be seen. Jethro Hale stood waiting as boots pounded the veranda. Pat sat tense in her chair, her brown eyes wide.

A knock sounded on the door, a hard, imperative knock. Jethro Hale hesitated an instant, then strode to the door and swung it open, stepping to one side and a little back as he did.

Into the room shouldered half a dozen men. The spread out slightly as they entered, leaving standing somewhat alone in the middle, a big, well set-up, rather good-looking man of something like thirty years of age. He had hard blue eyes, a tight-lipped mouth, and an arrogant bearing. His black brows drew together

in a frown as his gaze rested on old Jethro.

"Well," asked Hale, "what do you fellers want?"

The men on either side of the big man, men whose garb proclaimed them cowhands, said nothing. But the frown deepened on the face of the man in the center.

"What we want, Hale," he said in a harsh voice, "is for you to bundle up what yuh want to pack along with yuh. We're escortin' yuh out of this valley tonight—now. Then we figger to burn this shack to the ground."

Pat's breath caught in a gasp. Old Jethro's jaw dropped. But before he could reply, the men in the doorway jumped a foot as a clear voice spoke from the dark dining room:

"Reckon, gents, yuh figger wrong!"

Walt Slade stepped into view and stood towering over the men he faced. The thumbs of his slim hands were hooked over his double cartridge belts and just above the flaring-out black butts of his long-barreled Colts. The little devils of laughter were gone from his gray eyes. In their place was a cold glitter, like frosted knife points in the sun.

The group by the door stared at him, silenced for the moment by their astonishment. Finally the big man in the center broke the silence.

"Who—who—what the devil!" he sputtered.

Instantly Walt Slade's voice, all the music gone from it, shot back at him.

"Tighten the latigo on yore jaw, feller. There's a lady present."

The big man flushed, his smooth-shaven face turning darkly red. His eyes glared. He started to speak but his words were drowned by *El Halcon's* ringing voice.

"And now," said the Hawk, "seein' as nobody asked yuh here, I reckon yuh'd better trail yore twine back the way yuh came."

The flush on the man's face deepened to almost purple. His eyes glared. With a roar he went for the heavy gun swinging low on his right hip. The room rocked to the crash of a shot!

Thumbs hooked over the cocked hammers of the guns whose rock-steady black muzzles, one wisping smoke, yawned at the group in the door, Walt Slade gazed through the slight powder fog. The big man was sputtering curses and pawing at his blood-spurting hand. His gun, the handle smashed by the Hawk's bullet, still protruded from its holster. His followers stood rigid, staring fearfully at the tall figure fronting them.

"Anybody else care to argue?" Slade asked.

EVIDENTLY nobody did. The men shuffled their feet uneasily, glanced aside from *El Halcon's* terrible eyes, and moved their hands not at all. Slade spoke to the big man, who was still cursing.

"I told yuh once before there's a lady present and to watch yore talk," he said. "Now shut up before the next one takes out a few of yore teeth."

The man shut up, glaring, wringing the blood from his bullet-creased hand.

"Feller, yuh're ridin' a mighty dangerous trail," Slade told him. "I'm here to tell yuh there's a law in this country, and yuh're buckin' up against more'n yuh can handle. Yuh're pretty big, but not big enough for that. Right now yuh're on private owned property. Yuh're bought and paid for as a trespasser if I drill yuh dead center. And if this old gent here cares to press a charge against yuh, yuh're liable to find yoreself pegging boot soles for the State. "And now," he concluded, "if yuh're all finished, suppose yuh trail yore twine, pronto."

The big man swallowed, gulped, finally mouthed words, his voice thick with anger.

"This *ain't* finished, feller," he said. "I'll be seein' *you* again!"

"Look good the first time, 'cause mebbe yuh won't get a second look," Slade told him imperturbably. "Get goin'!"

They got going, moving cautiously, careful to make no gesture that might be misinterpreted. Last through the door was the big man. He glared over his shoulder at Slade.

"We'll be back," he promised with vicious emphasis.

Old Jethro swung the heavy door behind him and shot the bolt into place.

"Think they'll be back?" he asked Slade, as hoofs sounded outside.

"Not tonight." The Hawk chuckled. "Reckon they got enough to hold 'em for a spell. You know that big jigger?"

"That's Pierce Stuart, who owns the

ranch called the Forked S, the biggest and best one in the valley," said Hale. "He got it from his dad who died about a year ago, I heard. His dad sort of run things hereabouts, I understand, and I reckon he figgers *he* does now that the old man passed on."

"Sort of got the look of a skookum he-wolf." Slade nodded. "Not a bad appearin' feller, though, but needs some sense knocked into his head. Uh-huh, sort of used to havin' his own way and liable to go off half-cocked. . . . Well, I've a notion I can use a mite of shut-eye. Up most of last night. . . ."

Dawn had not yet broken when Walt Slade arose, dressed, and walked to the stable to care for his horse. He paused to gaze across the wide valley toward where morning would soon appear clad in robes of rose and gold.

In the east a faint, pearly blush grew and brightened, spread by degrees over the whole great arch of the sky. Birds began to call in the trees. A faint wind shook down a shower of glittering dew gems. The glow deepened to scarlet edged with pulsing saffron. Next a ray from the unrisen sun, a single spear of light, shot suddenly across the sky, kissing the crests of the western hills and flooding them with glory.

Quickly the skies began to flame, and the light to pour itself into the valley like streams of many-colored gems into a giant bowl. The shadows fled away and vanished. The fiery edge of the sun appeared above the crests to the east. The jewels on the grass heads gleamed and scintillated. A very chorus of bird songs arose, and it was day.

Slade drew a deep breath, his pulses quickened by the sea of beauty upon which his eyes had looked.

"Too pretty a country for folks to be raisin' ructions in it," he mused. "But that's always the way. Too many don't stop to appreciate what they got, and too many don't understand that the only way they can ever learn to appreciate it, is to share it with others."

After attending to his horse's wants, Slade left the stable and walked a little way toward the trail, where he had a fuller view of the valley. He gazed southward toward the pass, which was still misty, the rays of the rising sun having not yet penetrated its depths.

As he gazed, something that glowed like a star burst from the curtain of mist. Beneath and in front of the gleaming disc were crawling dots that Slade quickly recognized as horses. Now the full shape of the strange object was visible, glittering in the sunlight as it swayed and lurched down the steep trail to the valley floor.

ANOTHER star of light came into view, and another and another. Slade counted a full thirty appearing as by magic from the shadows of the pass. Beside the train of objects rode horsemen, on either side, two by two.

Down the pass rolled the huge wains —ships of the prairie, huge, majestic, the vanguard of the forces of progress that were invading the land. Covered wagons —the conquerors of the West, by way of which gold-seeker, home-seeker, Mormon and settler had crossed the plains and carved an empire from a wilderness.

As Slade gazed at the approaching vehicles, a voice spoke at his elbow.

"That'll be Craig Flood and the boys he went after," observed Jethro Hale, who had joined the Hawk and stood staring into the south. "That's the business Flood had over east—to get the boys together and guide 'em here to this land we got title to. There's plenty for everybody."

Slade gave him a quick glance.

"Yuh don't mean to tell me they made the trip all the way from Kentucky in three weeks?" he asked incredulously.

Jethro Hale shook his head.

"Nope," he replied, "they had a colony over in the Nueces country, but they didn't like it over well there—too hot and too dry. Craig sent 'em word to get ready to move to a better place, and went to meet 'em on the way. They all come along, of course. They are Muggletonians."

Slade's lips pursed in a soundless whistle. He had read of that obscure but most vigorous sect whose doctrine most certainly never embodied the principle of nonresistance; quite the contrary. Although always few in number, they had never been known to compromise, not even in New England in the days of "persecution." These stern men, austere in their practices almost to the point of

asceticism, would no more consider allowing themselves to be driven from what they considered rightly theirs than they would think of preaching sermons to the coyotes. "Big trouble in the makin'," Slade told himself.

"It'll take quite a spell to run the wagons up here," remarked Hale. "Suppose we go in and eat summat. Pat's gettin' breakfast ready. . . ."

When they returned to the yard, the wagon train was lurching slowly along the trail less than a quarter of a mile distant. A man riding somewhat in front sighted them, put spurs to his horse and galloped forward. As he drew near, Walt Slade surveyed him with quickened interest.

He looked to be the very genius and impersonation of asceticism. His cheeks were sunken, his features thin and thought-worn. But his deep-set eyes under tufted brows burned with a fierce energy. His mouth was a hard line across his bloodless face.

He was hatless and his grizzled hair swept back from his big forehead in a thick wave. In figure he was tall, stringy and hard-bitten, with broad shoulders and abnormally long arms. As he came up to the waiting pair, he pulled his splendid roan horse to a sliding halt.

"How be yuh, Brother Hale?" he said in a deep, resonant voice. "Things been peaceful hereabouts while I was away?"

"How are you, Flood?" replied Jethro. "We had a mite of excitement here last night, but everything turned out all right. I want yuh to know a feller who proved to be a good friend to me—Walt Slade. Slade, this here is Craig Flood I told you about."

Craig Flood bent a piercing glance on the Hawk. "Glad to meet yuh, Slade," he acknowledged. "If Brother Hale says yuh're a friend, I reckon yuh be, even though yuh got considerable of a cattleman look about yuh." He turned back to Hale. "What was the happenin' yuh spoke of, Jethro?"

Old Jethro told him, in terse sentences. Flood's brows drooped and his deep-set eyes flashed.

"Those sinful men must be purged of

Slade gripped the stock of his rifle as he saw the twirling rope

their inquities, and I callate I'm the instrument to do it," he declared sternly. "I'm ridin' on ahead. Aim to camp the boys on the land north of my place, and give 'em a chance to look over their new property. I got title to all the land west of the trail to the hills, Jethro. We'll start stringin' fence tomorrow."

With a nod he rode on. By this time the wagons had reached the spot where Slade and Hale stood, lurching ponderously with rumbling wheels and creaking harness, the outriders pacing their horses slowly, one on either side of each wagon.

Walt Slade gazed at these lean, sinewy soldiers of the sod, their mouths firm set, their eyes steady, rifles hooked beneath their arms. He repeated to himself his earlier remark:

"Uh-huh, the making of big trouble here. These jiggers are fighters, and every bit as salty as any Texan of the Big Bend country. They won't take kind to bein' shoved around."

CHAPTER III

Caught

WITH billowing canvas, the wagons rolled past. Slade saw the faces of women and children peering through the openings. Men drove the horses, often with another man, with rifle cradled, sharing the high seat with the driver. Slade estimated there were fully a hundred able-bodied toilers and fighters in the train.

"And I've a notion the cowmen can't get together much more'n that, includin' all their hands," he told himself. "Uh-huh, I figger I'm in for a busy time before I trail my twine out of this neck of the woods."

He watched the wagons roll on northward, his eyes dark with thought, the characteristic concentration furrow deep between his black brows. Abruptly he turned to Hale.

"I hear tell there's a town somewheres around here?" he observed interrogatively.

"That's right," agreed Jethro. "Up to the north, at the head of the valley and over to the east a mite, where the trail runs across the north hills to Winslow, the railroad town. It's called Terlingua."

"Three tongues," Slade translated.

"Uh-huh, I've heard tell the first fellers there were a Mexican, a Injun, and a white man. They were trappers and built a cabin. They all talked different words, so they named the town for that."

Slade chuckled. "Them old-timers had a way with 'em when it come to pickin' names," he remarked. "I think I'll take a little ride up to that town."

"Quite smart a ride, but I reckon that black hoss won't make much of a chore of it," commented Hale. "Purty busy town, particularly when the cowhands come in for a bust. All the trade from the railroad to the valley comes by way of the town. Stage lines and a freight wagon line over the hills from Winslow, which is about forty miles farther to the north. Head back this way whenever yuh've a mind to, son. Me and Pat will be mighty glad to see yuh. Nothin' would suit us better'n for yuh to put up with us all the time yuh're around."

"Much obliged," Slade said. "I'm liable to take yuh up on that offer, if I don't tie onto a job of ridin' hereabouts. . . Say, is Flood from Kentucky, too?"

"So he says," replied Hale. "I never knowed him back there. I first met him last fall when he come back to the Nueces country after makin' a trip over here and takin' up his land. I was aimin' to settle in the Nueces country myself, though I didn't like it much. Yuh see, I knowed quite a few of the boys back in Kentucky and liked 'em. I ain't a Muggletonian myself—they're a mite too strict to my likin'. Abner Sutton ain't either, but his sister's husband is. That's how he come to be along with 'em.

"Flood is the sort of feller that usually gets to the top in any community, I reckon. He's a kind of preacher and makes good talks to the boys. When he come back to the Nueces, he persuaded 'em to come along with him over here. They wouldn't leave last fall, though. Wanted to harvest their crops first and send back to Kentucky for a few more of their kind what were still there.

"So me and Abner Sutton agreed to come over here with Flood last fall, which we did. Flood had took up his

own land and paid for it. He got options on the rest for the boys. Them to take up the options and buy the land before they moved, which they did.

"Flood and Abner and me come on over and built our houses and put in early crops. The boys have plenty of time to plant. It's a purty long season here. They'll be breakin' ground in a hurry."

"Any of the boys know Flood in Kentucky?"

"I don't think so," said Hale. "Never heard any of 'em mention it. Most of 'em are from around the mountain country, though, and I understand Flood is from the blue grass section, down in the valley. I've a notion the chief reason the boys agreed to come over here is because of the mountains. Yuh get a hill man out of sight of the hills, and he ain't happy."

Slade nodded thoughtfully, and went up to the house to say good-by to Pat.

He rode north, tall and graceful atop his great black horse, the small guitar in its water-proof case and suspended across his broad shoulders by a silken thong lending a touch of lightness and grace to his well-worn range costume.

Pat and old Jethro watched him go, the girl wide-eyed, a trifle wistful.

"Did you ever see such a splendid man, Grandpa?" she remarked.

Old Jethro shook his head. "Never did," he admitted. He glanced down suddenly at his granddaughter. "Ain't gettin' notions about that feller, are yuh, honey?"

Pat slowly shook her curly head. "No girl in her right senses would," she replied. "To his kind a woman is just something to smile at, and—forget all about. He'll be that way for a long time, I think."

"Uh-huh, he's purty young—under thirty," Hale agreed. "A fine young feller, though, a fine young feller."

SLADE rode at a good pace. Soon he passed Abner Sutton's tight little farmhouse and outbuildings. A little later he sighted what he knew must be Craig Flood's *casa*, rather larger and more elaborately planned than the dwellings of Hale and Sutton. He was surprised to note, as he drew near, several men in range country garb loafing about the outbuildings. They eyed him sharply as he rode past, but did not speak. Back of Flood's wire he saw a considerable number of good cows grazing on the rich grass.

"Looks like that jigger is goin' in for stock raisin' as well as farmin'," he mused. "Well, he's got enough land fenced in to take care of a sizable herd, and leave plenty of ground for plantin'. A pretty smart *hombre*, I've a notion."

Soon after passing the fence that bounded Flood's holdings on the north, he came upon the wagon train. The great wains were strung out on the land west of the trail in open order like an army. Their owners were busy unloading various commodities. Slade saw rolls of barbed wire, tools, post-hole diggers, and other equipment. Riding up and down the line on his tall roan was Craig Flood, superintending, directing. His deep voice rang out above all other sounds.

"Uh-huh, got a head on his shoulders, all right," Slade substantiated his earlier opinion of the leader of the Muggletonians.

Flood noted him riding past and waved a hand, but did not further greet the Hawk. Slade waved acknowledgment and rode on. The farmers also waved and nodded, but did not desist from their tasks. Soon he left them behind.

As he rode, *El Halcon* surveyed the terrain with an appreciative eye.

"Never saw a better spread of rangeland," he told himself. "And this over to the west is about the best of all. It's a wonder the cowmen didn't get title to it long ago. Now they've let somebody else get ahead of 'em through their own neglect and are pawin' the sod. Well, they've got plenty as it is, and the farmers comin' in is to their advantage, if they only had sense enough to realize it—or wasn't too dang stubborn to admit it. Another market for 'em. A chance to get fresh vegetables and things right at home. Good neighbors if they'll just give the jiggers the opportunity to neighbor. Well, it's considerable of a chore to make 'em see the light, but it's been done before, and I reckon it can be done again."

Chuckling to himself, his gray eyes sunny, he slipped the guitar from its case, let the bridle drop on Shadow's neck and ran his slim fingers across the strings with crisp power. He struck a booming chord or two, threw back his black head and

sang in a voice as richly golden as the sunlight streaming down from the blue of the Texas sky:

Oh, the shippin' days are over
And the moon's a-ridin' high
With a silver loop a-twirl for
Maverick stars a-scootin' by.
While the wind yelps in the tree tops
And the leaves come flutterin' down
And every little grass-head
Wears a starry, dew-gemmed crown.
Oh, the trail is white before me,
And my hoss is steppin' strong,
And I'm amblin' back to Texas,
To the land where I belong!

The music ended in a ringing note and a crash of chords. And as an echo, a voice spoke from the growth flanking the west side of the trail:

"Mighty purty! Now just keep yore hands on that guitar where they are. Yuh're covered!"

An ominous click punctuated the words. Slade sat tense, his hands motionless on the guitar. A slight knee pressure halted Shadow.

From the growth rode Pierce Stuart, the Forked S owner, and three of his punchers, drawn guns in their hands.

Stuart regarded the Hawk with a triumphant grin.

"I'm lookin', feller, lookin' close, just like yuh told me to," he said. "And I figger to take a second look, too, and a lot more of 'em before I'm finished... Get his hardware, Hank. Don't forget the saddle-gun, and look him over careful."

One of the cowhands warily approached Slade from the side and slightly to the rear. He gingerly plucked the big Colts from their holsters and drew Slade's Winchester from the saddle-boot. He handed them back to a companion, felt under Slade's armpits for a possible hidden shoulder holster, and prodded at the back of his neck.

"Look in his hat," cautioned Stuart. "His kind sometimes packs a short iron there."

Outwardly calm, but inwardly seething with rage, Slade sat silent. He had been "caught settin'" for fair. He wondered what the cowmen had in mind for him. Stuart didn't look like the sort to go in for indiscriminate killings, but nevertheless Slade's pulse quickened a little as the ranch owner cast a contemplative eye toward a stout tree branch stretching across the trail.

BUT if Stuart had a necktie party in mind, he did not choose to put the notion into effect at the moment. He gestured ahead.

"That hoss looks mighty fast," he remarked, drawing a rifle from his saddle-boot, "but this long gun packs a slug that's a heap faster, so don't try anythin' smart unless yuh want a air hole in yore hide. Get goin', now, and keep ahead of us, but not too far. Yuh can put the guitar back where yuh got it, unless yuh're a mind for some more singin'. I wasn't jokin' when I said it was mighty purty."

Slade, however, was hardly in the mood to respond to the invitation. He cased his guitar, swung it in place across his shoulders and spoke to Shadow. At a fast clip the procession rode, Slade in front but acutely conscious of the rifle cradled in the crook of Stuart's arm.

Mile after mile they rode, while the sun climbed the long slant of the sky and crossed the zenith. Slade noted herds of grazing cattle, and now and then caught sight of well-built ranchhouses on hill tops or shaded by groves.

The afternoon was getting along when they climbed a long slope, topped a ridge and before them lay the town of Terlingua, at the case of the further sag.

Terlingua was a typical sprawling cowtown with its main street lined with false-fronts and a few two-story "skyscrapers." It looked busy and prosperous, as doubtless it was, being headquarters for the rich valley. As they clattered along the main street, heads turned to stare at the strange procession. Nobody sought to stop them, however, and midway along the street, Stuart himself called a halt.

Slade glanced at the building in front of which they had paused, and for the first time since his capture, a grin twitched the corners of his mouth. Across the window glass was lettered:

SHERIFF'S OFFICE

"Unfork, and up the steps," Stuart ordered. "Step right in and don't be bashful. Bill Allen will be almighty pleased to get acquainted with yuh, I figger. Bill's the sheriff, yuh know."

His face grave, but his gray eyes dancing, Slade obeyed. He mounted the steps and entered the sheriff's office, the others

crowding close behind him. A broad-shouldered old gent sitting with his boots on a table and his chair cocked back comfortably stared at them in evident astonishment.

"What the blazes?" he demanded, bringing the boots to the floor with a thud.

"Oh, nothin' much," Stuart blared. "I just brought in *El Halcon!*"

The sheriff stared. "What—who—how —" he stuttered.

"I caught him," chortled Stuart. "One of the boys recognized him. We laid for him and got the drop on him. Easy as fallin' off a peeled log. Lock him up, Bill."

Before the astounded sheriff could make answer, Slade spoke, his voice deceptively mild.

"Just what charge yuh aimin' to put against me, Stuart?" he asked.

Pierce Stuart's eyes opened a trifle. Evidently he was momentarily taken aback.

"Why—why—er—the sheriff'll have one," he replied at length.

Slade turned to the old peace officer.

"What's the charge, Sheriff?" he asked pleasantly.

It was the sheriff's turn to hesitate.

"Why—" he began.

"Got a reward notice on me?" Slade interrupted.

The sheriff tugged his mustache. "Why —no, I ain't," he admitted.

"Got any orders from anybody to bring me in?" Slade relentlessly pursued.

"Why—not any I can rec'lect."

"Then, what's the charge against me?"

Pierce Stuart let out a roar of indignation.

"Everybody knows the hellion is a owl-hoot!"

"Knowin' and provin' are two different things," Slade remarked composedly.

"Yuh've shot fellers—everybody knows that," Stuart stated accusingly.

"Ever hear tell of me shootin' anybody who didn't have a shootin' coming?"

"That's beside the point," declared Stuart. "Folks ain't got no business takin' the law into their own hands, like you're knowed to have done."

"That's just what I hoped you'd say," Slade replied. He turned to Sheriff Allen, his face stern. "Sheriff," he said, "you know very well yuh haven't got anything against me yuh can lock me up for. Yuh can't make a charge against me, and yuh know it. But I'm goin' to make a charge, and I'm going to make it stick. I charge these men with holdup and robbery, and demand their arrest. If yuh refuse, I'll write a letter to Captain Jim McNelty of the Texas Rangers, outlinin' all the facts and demandin' action."

THE sheriff's jaw sagged. Pierce Stuart turned purple.

"Why, yuh loco horned toad!" he bellowed. "What the blue blazes yuh talkin' about? Holdup and robbery!"

"Threw down on me with a gun, didn't yuh?" Slade demanded. "Took my sixes and my rifle, at gun point, didn't yuh? Sheriff, I demand justice. Lock these men up!"

"I won't let him lock me up!" bawled Stuart. "I won't—"

"Now *you* got a charge to put against him, Sheriff," Slade interrupted. "Resistin' an officer of the law in the performance of his duty!"

Pierce Stuart danced up and down like

[*Turn page*]

a hen on a hot skillet.

"The hellion shot a hunk of meat out of my hand!" he squalled.

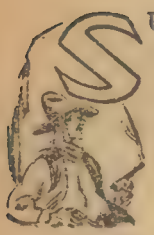
"Want me to tell the sheriff what yuh was doin' when I creased yore hand?" Slade instantly suggested. "Then he'll have still another charge to put against yuh."

Stuart let out a wail of anguish. He was almost crying with rage and bewilderment.

"Here I try to do my duty as a law-abidin' citizen, and I find myself headed for the calaboose!" he squawked. "There ain't no justice!"

CHAPTER IV

Call to Arms



SUDDENLY Walt Slade laughed—a ringing laugh that filled the sheriff's office with music. He leaned against the wall and laughed, laughed till the tears ran down his bronzed cheeks. The sheriff regarded him mournfully. Pierce Stuart gulped, sputtered, shook his head, stamped his foot.

But that ringing laughter was infectious. Abruptly, as Stuart met Slade's dancing eyes, a grin tugged at the corners of the rancher's mouth, spread to show nice teeth. The cowboys also grinned. The sheriff tried to look stern, but a twinkle birthed in his frosty eyes, and he chuckled.

Slade stopped laughing. He wiped the tears from his eyes. His face hardened.

"Stuart," he said, "I told yuh last night yuh was ridin' a dangerous trail, and now I'm tellin' yuh again. If yuh keep on going off half-cocked, yuh'll end up by findin' yoreself in serious trouble. Yuh better tighten yore cinches and quit pawin' the sod. What's yore row with the farmers, anyhow?"

"Nesters are bad enough—" Stuart began, but Slade interrupted him.

"How do yuh know they're nesters?" he demanded. "Do yuh claim to own the land they're on?"

"No," Stuart admitted sullenly. "It's open range."

"And because it's open range, yuh figger yuh can order anybody off it?"

Stuart glowered, but did not reply, other than a mumble under his breath.

"It may have been open range," Slade said, "but unless old Jethro Hale lied, and I've no reason to think he did, it's not open range any more. Hale and the others have title to it. They bought and paid for that land and got title from the State."

Stuart sputtered curses. "Nesters just as nesters are bad enough," he repeated, "but there's more to it than that. There hadn't been a cow lifted out of this valley for years till them hellions showed up. Not three months after they squatted down there, the spreads in this valley began losin' cows. And that ain't all. Just last month the stage from Winslow to Terlingua was held up and the driver killed. The hellions got nigh onto ten thousand dollars in gold that was bein' packed to the bank here."

"And, without anything to go on other than your suspicions, yuh figger the farmers did it?"

"I'd like to know who else!" growled Stuart. "Mighty funny—everythin' peaceful and law-abidin' before they showed up."

"Things ain't always what they look to be," Slade replied. "The sheriff hasn't got any case against 'em, or he'd have made arrests before now."

"He ain't got nothin'," snorted Stuart, "and we can't get him to do nothin'. I've plumb got enough. For a busted peso, I'd round up a dozen of my hands and ride down there and settle this thing once for all!"

"I've a notion yuh'd find a dozen hardly enough for the chore," Slade remarked.

Stuart shot him a suspicious glance. "Meanin' yuh figger to play along with 'em and back 'em up?"

"I don't mean to play along with anybody," Slade denied. "But I still figger a dozen would be sort of few to handle the chore you spoke of. This mornin' about a hundred more of the farmers, with their families and furnishin's, thirty covered-wagon loads, come through the south pass. I understand they've got title to the whole west side of the valley. So unless yuh figger to start another Lincoln County war, Stuart, I reckon yuh'd better ease up on your big medicine."

Stuart sat down heavily in a nearby chair. "Thirty wagon loads!" he muttered. "Reckon that means the end of cow raisin'

in this valley."

"I don't see why," Slade retorted. "Yuh got plenty of range. No reason why yuh can't live peaceful with them fellers."

"There won't be a hoof of stock left in this valley by roundup time," Stuart growled. Again his eyes rested suspiciously on the Hawk. "Did them hellions bring *you* in here to do their fightin' for 'em?" he demanded.

"They did not," Slade replied. "In fact, that's just what old Jethro Hale asked me—did the cowmen bring me in to do their shootin' for 'em. He said a note left on his fence said a feller was comin' to gun 'em up."

PIERCE STUART muttered something under his breath. Sheriff Allen glowered at Slade.

"Why in blazes *did* yuh come here?" he demanded.

"Just amblin' around," Slade replied. "It's a pretty nice lookin' country, though, and I've a notion I'll coil my twine here for a spell."

The sheriff groaned. "As if I didn't already have enough trouble! Now I'll have to keep a eye on you, too."

"Stuart will help yuh," Slade said cheerfully. "He said he wanted to give me a lot of looks."

"If I never set eyes on yuh again, it'll be a heap too soon," Stuart declared, with great heartiness.

Slade chuckled. "I'll try and keep out of yore sight," he promised.

Stuart snorted pessimistically. "Reckon it don't matter over much," he said. "There'll be trouble enough. Just wait till the boys hear of them thirty wagons. They'll be r'arin' and chargin'." He got to his feet, batted his hat over one eye. "If yuh don't figger to lock me up, Allen," he told the sheriff, "I aim to ride over to the Bradded R and see Charlie Russell and then I want to have a talk with Hunk Boudin."

He turned to Slade, looked him up and down.

"Mebbe I did go off sort of half-cocked, feller," he admitted, "but of late I've been as peevish as a teased snake."

"No hard feelings," Slade told him.

Stuart and his hands left the office. The sheriff gazed after them, shaking his grizzled head.

"Pierce is so darn stubborn he wouldn't move for a prairie fire," said the sheriff. "Tryin' to talk him out of anythin' he's got sot in is like tryin' to scratch yore ear with yore elbow. I shore see trouble in the makin'. Right now I feel like the frazzled end of a misspent life."

"I've a notion it'll all work out all right before long," Slade comforted him. "Things usually do. And now, if yuh don't figger to lock *me* up, I think I'll mosey out and give the pueblo a once-over. A stable hereabouts where I can put up my hoss?"

"Oh, get out of my sight!" growled the sheriff. "Yeah, there's a stable down the alley around the next corner. Roomin' house right on the corner next to it, if yuh figger to spend the night."

Slade chuckled, picked up his guns, which Stuart had left on the sheriff's table, and holstered them. He tucked his Winchester under his arm and left the office.

A cheerful-looking restaurant directly across the street from the sheriff's office attracted the Hawk. After putting up his horse and arranging for a room for the night, he repaired to the restaurant and enjoyed a leisurely meal. He smoked a cigarette or two, then left the eating house and moseyed out to look the town over.

It seemed to Slade that Terlingua was over-active, even for a Saturday evening. Long lines of saddled and bridled horses stood at the hitchracks, and more riders were arriving by the minute. He entered a big saloon, sauntered to the well-crowded bar and ordered a drink. Glass in hand, he listened to the conversation going on around him.

Quickly he realized that the prevailing topic was the arrival of the wagon train that morning. Cowhands going about their chores had observed the wains and the activities of the newly arrived farmers. The news had spread over the valley like a grass fire.

The discussions were heated. The cowmen were bitterly resentful. Threats were freely made.

Slade's black brows drew together as he listened. He knew the situation was packed with dynamite. One untoward incident would start a conflagration it would be difficult to check. More than one bitter range war had been fought over less.

The ranch owners, understanding the

situation and knowing that if the farmers had really title to the land they could be evicted only by lawless force, might be slow to move. But the hot-headed young rannies might easily commit acts that would provoke the farmers to retaliation, with the inevitable result that all would be embroiled in short order.

Nor did Slade believe all the danger lay in the resentment of the cattlemen at what they considered an unwarranted intrusion. He did not forget the burning eyes and arrogant bearing of the leader of the Muggletonians, Craig Flood.

"That hellion is spoilin' for trouble," Slade told himself. "He's just as much on the prod as Pierce Stuart and his bunch, and I figger he's got more savvy than Stuart, and so he's more dangerous. I'll bet a hatful of pesos he'll be the first one to pull somethin' that'll start a row. Some of these young hellions will do somethin' that'll give him an excuse, and when he hits back, he'll be in the clear, too, and actin' with what he'll consider and point out as justification."

THINKING deeply, *El Halcon* left the saloon and continued his stroll along the main street. Almost the first person he bumped into was Sheriff Bill Allen. The sheriff appeared in an even worse temper than earlier in the day. He paused to speak with Slade.

"Recollect sayin', when yuh was teasin' Pierce Stuart, that yuh intended writin' a letter to McNelty of the Rangers?" asked the sheriff. "Well, I reckon I'll get the jump on yuh. I'm headin' for the telegraph office right now, to send a wire to McNelty askin' for a troop to be sent over here. I figger we'll need 'em."

"Got a telegraph office here?" Slade inquired, interested.

"Uh-huh. A wire was run down here from Winslow last year."

Slade nodded. "Do me a favor, Sheriff?" he asked.

"Shore, within reason," Allen replied. "What yuh want?"

"When yuh send that wire to McNelty," Slade replied slowly, "mention to him that, among yore other troubles, *El Halcon* is here."

Sheriff Allen's jaw sagged. He stared at Slade as if firmly convinced that he held converse with a lunatic.

"Well," he said at length, "I've heard some good ones in my day, but now I figger I've seen everythin'. *El Halcon* notifyin' the Rangers of his whereabouts! Ain't been eatin' loco weed, have yuh?"

"Yuh'll do it?" Slade asked gravely.

"Shore—shore!" the sheriff assured him. "Be glad to. It ought to help. I'm askin' for just one troop, but that'd ought to get me two, mebbe more!"

With a disgusted snort he passed on. Slade chuckled under his breath and continued his stroll.

Walt Slade went to bed in no pleasant frame of mind. He anticipated trouble. It was plain that Sheriff Allen did also, and felt himself unable to cope with it.

Slade had decided that the old peace officer was an honest man, one who could be trusted to do his duty. That his sympathies would be with the cattlemen of the valley was but natural. But Slade felt that the lawman would try to do justice to both fractions and would hold no brief for either if lawless tactics were resorted to.

"But I've a notion he was sort of behind the door when they handed out brains," he told himself. "Reckon he was never up against anything like this before. Don't blame him for bein' worried. I don't feel any too good about it myself. Well, reckon the only thing to do is set tight and see which way the cat will jump. If I could figger that out in advance, though, it might save a lot of scratches. . . ."

Early morning found Slade riding south at a fast pace. He wanted to consult with old Jethro who, he felt, packed considerable influence with the farmers.

The sun was well up the sky when he reached the point where the wagons had been deployed the day before. He rounded a bend, saw before him a wide clearing west of the trail. The clearing, which was just north of the line of wagons, was occupied by the farmers and their families.

They stood in silent rows, their eyes fixed on the tall form of a man standing on a little raised platform near the edge of the trail. Slade recognized Craig Flood.

Flood held a large book in his hand, from which he was evidently reading to his attentive audience. His great voice rolled in thunder across the clearing, as he read from the book:

" 'Arise, recollect it, and make thy share

in it plain, lest thou be like unto a beast of the field that remembereth not; neither is he remembered. Take that which is thine own, and hold fast, nor be swerved from thy purpose!' "

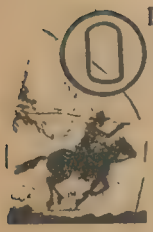
Flood closed the book and held it aloft. *El Halcon's* keen eyes read the title stamped in gold upon its ancient cover. It was "The Divine Looking-Glass," the book of Lodowicke Muggleton, the militant seer of the Muggletonians.

The concentration furrow was deep between Walt Slade's black brows as he rode on, waving his hand in reply to Flood's salutation. The words he had just heard had had an ominous ring. He felt that the doubtless carefully chosen passage was an exhortation to battle. Flood anticipated trouble and was preparing his companions for the eventuality.

Much wire had already been strung along the trail. The farmers were losing no time in getting down to business. And that wire was a challenge to the cattlemen of the valley.

CHAPTER V

The Boom



OLD JETHRO had a companion sitting on the porch with him when Slade reached Hale's farmhouse.

"This is Ab Sutton, my next-door neighbor I was tellin' you about yesterday, Slade," he introduced as the Hawk unforked and mounted the steps.

Abner Sutton was tall, gaunt and shrunken. He had deep-set, pale eyes, and a thin-lipped mouth.

"A hard man, with the bitter drop in him," was Slade's verdict as he shook the farmer's bony hand.

"Got bad news, son," said Jethro. "My wire was cut last night—cut in four places. Stock was drove in and nigh spoiled my alfalfa field. Ab's wire was cut, too."

Slade received this unpleasant information with concern. Abner Sutton's tight mouth tightened still more and his eyes seemed even paler in his deeply lined, sallow face.

"I'm settin' up with a rifle every night from now on," he said in his deep, harsh voice. "And I don't aim to miss what I line sights on."

"I'm guardin' my fence from now on, too," observed Hale. "Some of the boys from farther up will be down every other night to spell us."

Slade nodded, his brows drawing together. He did not say so, but he resolved to do a little patrolling himself.

It was with this object in view that he left the farmhouse an hour or so before dark.

"Figger to take a little ride down toward the pass before I go to bed," he told Hale. "Don't take a shot at me when I ride back."

"Don't reckon I'll make a mistake," Jethro assured him.

Slade did ride south toward the pass, but as the dusk deepened, he turned east across the rangeland and after he was some distance from the trail, veered to the north, riding parallel with the track and taking advantage of all cover that offered. It was some hours after full dark had fallen that he passed Hale's and then Sutton's farms.

"I figger if the hellions who've been usin' wire nippers decide on another try, they'll pass up Hale and Sutton and take a whirl at Flood," he told Shadow. "Now we'll try and figger where they'd be most likely to hit. I'd say that stretch right ahead where there's a fairly open space flanked on each side by thickets would be most likely. There they can sneak up to the fence without bein' seen by anybody who might be ridin' along this way. Yes, that ought to be it. And right here in this clump of brush is a made-to-order hideout for us. We'll just coil our twine here and take it easy for a spell."

A gibbous moon rode in the misty sky. Its faint light clearly outlined the stretch of fence some thirty feet or so west of the trail.

Lounging comfortably in the saddle, Slade waited.

An hour passed, and another, and at length his patience was rewarded. A faint sound broke the silence, the hoofbeats of a horse, muffled by the dust of the trail. Another moment and two men rode from the dark bristle of growth to the south.

They rode slowly, furtively, their slowly pacing horses making little sound. Direct-

ly opposite where Slade sat tense and watching, they drew rein and sat gazing toward the fence. The light was too faint to reveal their features at that distance, but Slade could see that they wore rangeland garb.

As Slade watched and waited, one of the riders leaned forward. A moment later he straightened up. Slade could see a rope twirling in the air. He gripped the stock of his rifle, preparatory to drawing the weapon from the boot.

The rider made his cast. The rope snaked through the air. A tight loop settled over a fence post above the strands of wire. The trained cow pony whirled as the rope was drawn taut. The horse lunged forward, away from the fence. Slade slid the rifle back and up.

With the appalling suddenness of a lightning flash, a dazzling glare of reddish flame dimmed the moonlight. There was a terrific thunderclap of sound. Slade reeled in the saddle, almost hurled to the ground by the concussion of the blast.

Shadow screamed with fright, bounded high into the air, and bolted madly from that roaring terror of the night. As Slade fought to control the great horse that was frantic with alarm, he heard a terrified yell and the beat of racing hoofs.

Blinded by the glare, deafened by the roar of the explosion, it was moments before Slade could get his mount subdued. By the time he got him turned around and headed back toward the fence, the two night riders had vanished.

SLADE rode to the trail and halted Shadow. He sat staring at a great hole blown in the ground under the line of the fence. The wire, ripped from the posts and snapped, lay tangled upon the ground. The air was rank with the acrid fumes of burned dynamite.

Slade let out a low whistle of amazement. Suddenly he cocked his head in an attitude of listening. Hoofs were drumming the trail toward him from the north.

"Somebody comin' to see about it fast," he muttered. "Reckon that'll be Flood and some of his boys."

Sitting clearly outlined in the moonlight, Slade waited.

Craig Flood and six other mounted men charged from the growth to the north. Slade heard Flood yelp an exclamation. The horses jolted to a halt a half-dozen paces from where Slade sat Shadow.

"What the tarnation?" shouted Flood. "What you doin' here?"

"I might ask you the same question," Slade retorted. "What kind of a contraption did yuh have rigged up here?"

A cold smile crossed Flood's face. His eyes glittered.

"I made a boom," he said.

"You made a boom, all right," Slade agreed. "One devil of a boom. How'd yuh do it?"

Flood ignored the question. "Where's the hellion that cut the wire and set it off?" he demanded. "There ought to be somethin' left of him."

"I reckon there'd be mighty little left of him if he'd happened to have been down there by the fence," Slade told him grimly.

He recounted what he had seen just before the explosion.

"That's a new one!" snorted Flood. "Figgered to haul out the posts and let the wire down that way, eh? Well, they were almighty lucky, that's all!"

"What kind of an infernal arrangement did yuh have rigged up?" Slade repeated.

"I'll tell yuh," Flood replied, a note of pride in his voice. "As I said, I made a boom. Here's how I did it. I took a old muzzle-loadin' shotgun and charged it with powder. Then I slid down a dynamite cap on top of the powder, and poked in dynamite on top of the cap. I put a shotgun cap on the nipple of the gun and put the gun in a wooden box with three more sticks of dynamite. I fastened a wire to the trigger.

"I cocked the gun and buried the box in the ground just under a post that wasn't set in the ground—just set on top of it with the fence wire holdin' it in place. Used a crooked post and fastened the wire from the trigger of the shotgun to the bottom of the post.

"If them hellions had cut the wire along here, the post would have fallen down, the end would have kicked up, jerked the trigger fire, shot the gun and set off the dynamite, just like it did when they pulled the post over with the rope. Only if they'd been cuttin' the fence wire with nippers, the dynamite would have got 'em, like I hoped it would."

Slade stared at the man. He felt his

flesh crawl at thought of the fellow's ruthless vindictiveness.

"Plump snake-blooded!" he told himself. Aloud, he said. "Don't yuh figger that's carrying things a mite far, Flood?"

"I got a right to protect my property!" Flood retorted, the hot glitter back in his eyes. "If fellers don't want to get hurt, let 'em keep away from it."

"Yuh got any more of them blasted things planted, Flood?" the Hawk demanded.

"Anybody who wants to know bad can find out by foolin' around my fence," Flood replied. He turned to his companions. "Come on, boys. Let's be gettin' back to bed. Don't figger there'll be any more trouble raisin' around here tonight. . . . Spend the night with us, Slade?"

"Reckon I'll ride back to Jethro Hale's place," Slade answered. "I told him I'd be back."

Flood nodded. The group turned their horses and rode back the way they had come. Slade watched them vanish into the growth to the north, his eyes thoughtful.

"Be gettin' *back* to bed!" he repeated Flood's words. "Them jiggers must sleep in all their clothes, and with their guns on, and with their hosses right outside the door under full rig, even to rifles in the saddle-boots!"

WHEN the sound of hoofbeats had faded to silence, Slade dismounted and carefully went over the ground in the vicinity of the dynamite crater. Finally he discovered what he was searching for —the rope with which the would-be fence cutter had made his cast. A fragment of the shattered fence post was still in the tight loop.

"Thought I saw that jigger taking dallies around the horn as his hoss turned," he muttered, fingering the twine. "Didn't tie hard and fast, or he'd have dragged the rope plumb after him when his cayuse bolted."

The rope was a good seven-sixteenths hard twist Manila, better than forty-five feet in length and showed signs of much usage.

"Used for heavy outside patchin'," Slade mused. "The ranny who twisted this is a tophand, and I've a notion this twine is his favorite. Chances are he won't be happy till he's got another just like it singed and suppled and the knot pulled down."

There was a speculative look in his gray eyes as he carefully stowed the twin in a saddle-bag.

Slade left the trail and circled back across the rangeland, retracing the route he had followed to the north. Below the Hale farm he cut back to the trail. As he approached old Jethro's wire he began to whistle, and rode slowly. He was not at all surprised when Hale himself stepped from a clump of growth, rifle in hand.

"I've a notion yuh can take a chance on goin' to bed now," Slade told him. "Don't figger there'll be anything else happen tonight."

"Mebbe not," Hale agreed, though a trifle dubiously. "Funny things have already been happenin'. There ain't a cloud in the sky, but a while back I heard a thunderclap just as plain as anythin'. Did you hear it?"

Slade smiled a trifle. "It was mighty nigh like a thunderclap, from where I heard it," he agreed.

In a few terse sentences he acquainted Hale with what had happened. Old Jethro gave a low whistle of amazement.

"I couldn't go that far, son," he said gravely. "Cuttin' a feller's wire is purty ornery, but to blow a poor devil to pieces with dynamite—well, that's a mite too much. He's a cold proposition, Craig Flood. I'm glad I ain't obligated to him in any way."

"Obligated to him?"

"Well, quite a few of the boys owe him money. They didn't have quite enough to pay for their land, so Flood loaned 'em what they needed, at a purty high interest rate."

Slade looked thoughtful. "I see," he said. "They have clear title to their holdin's outside of what they owe Flood. I suppose he took mortgages on the land to secure his investment?"

"That's right," agreed Hale. "Well, as yuh say, there ain't much chance of anythin' else happenin' tonight, so I reckon we might as well go to bed."

The following day, Slade visited the farmers, in Hale's company. He found them strung across the prairie, working like bees. The strands of barbed wire crawled northward at a fast clip.

From time to time, Slade saw distant

groups of cowhands sitting their horses on the crests of rises or riding slowly along parallel with the fence builders. They made no demonstrations, however.

CHAPTER VI

Chance Meeting

THE day, and the night that followed, passed without incident. The next morning, Hale approached Slade.

"Pat wants to ride to town today," he told the Hawk. "She says she wants to buy some women's fixin's. Would yuh mind ridin' with her, son? I'm purty busy today and hate to spare the time."

"Plumb pleased to," Slade assured him.

An hour later, when the sun was still but little above the horizon, he rode northward with the curly-haired girl. Pat was mounted on a wiry little bay, and she rode well.

They were a few miles north of the last fence post when they observed a man riding toward them at a fast clip. As the rider drew near, Slade recognized Pierce Stuart.

The ranch owner recognized the Hawk and waved a greeting. He pulled up when they met, his glance traveling from one to the other. It held on Slade's winsome companion, then passed significantly to *El Halcon.*

Slade's lips twitched a trifle.

"Pat," he said, "this is Pierce Stuart, who owns the Forked S. Stuart, yuh've already seen the lady—the other night when yuh dropped in on her sort of unexpected. Miss Patricia Hale, Jethro Hale's granddaughter, Stuart."

Pierce Stuart stared, his jaw dropping slightly. Then he turned fiery red.

"R-reckon I—I didn't—see her!" he stuttered. "Was sort of busy right then. I *know* I didn't see her!"

Slade chuckled. "Reckon Miss Pat don't hold it against yuh for goin' off half-cocked," he comforted. "Reckon yuh're sort of made that way, Stuart, and can't help it."

"Reckon I am," Stuart mumbled. He squared his shoulders, met Slade's eyes. "Yuh know, feller," he said, "I been thinkin' considerable about what yuh told me there in the sheriff's office. I've a notion yuh've got somethin' there, and I figger to tighten my cinches a bit from now on, even though it ain't always easy. My old dad used to say that when a knife loses its temper, it ain't good steel any more, just pot metal. Reckon that sort of applies to a man, too."

"Yore dad had plenty of wrinkles on his horns," Slade agreed gravely. "Where yuh headed for, Stuart? We're ridin' to town. Care to come along with us?"

"Why—why, reckon it ain't a bad notion," Stuart accepted with alacrity. "I was just sort of ridin' down this way." He hesitated, glanced at Pat a trifle dubiously.

Patricia smiled demurely. "I'm sure you are welcome to ride with us, Mr. Stuart," she seconded Slade's invitation.

Stuart immediately reined his horse about and fell in on the other side, next to the girl. Walt Slade's gray eyes were dancing, but he kept a straight face.

Soon, Stuart and the girl were conversing in an animated fashion. Slade rode in silence, gradually edging his horse toward the inner side of the trail, which was fairly broad. There was a pleased look in his eyes.

Suddenly, however, he asked the Forked S owner a question:

"Where's yore spread in the valley, Stuart?"

Stuart glanced at him absently. "Why, we're sort of ridin' over it right now," he said. "My *casa* is about three miles to the northeast of here." Abruptly he appeared struck by inspiration. "Say," he exclaimed, "why don't we cut over there and have a bit of chuck before we ride on to town? It ain't late. I got a mighty good cook who'll throw together a prime surroundin' in two shakes of a calf's tail. How about it?"

"I figger it's a prime notion," Slade agreed. "What you say, Pat?"

"Why—why, I don't mind," the girl agreed.

"We can turn off right here," Stuart exclaimed with enthusiasm, suiting the action to the word.

The Forked S ranchhouse proved to be a big white *casa* built in Spanish style and set in a grove of ancient oaks. The bunkhouse, barns and other outbuildings

were tight and in good repair. Slade surveyed them with appreciation as they drew near.

Before the wide veranda, Stuart called a wrangler to care for the horses. He and Pat mounted the steps together. Slade lingered a moment, glancing about. His gaze centered on a stocky young cowboy who squatted over a small fire he had built near the bunkhouse. In his hands he held a new Manila rope, which he passed carefully and methodically back and forth over the flame.

SLADE strolled over to the puncher and stood surveying the operation.

"Singeing the whiskers off, eh?" he remarked in pleasantly conversational tones.

"Uh-huh." The puncher nodded, glancing up at the Hawk's towering form and expertly shifting the rope.

"Quite a chore, suppling a new twine," Slade remarked.

"Uh-huh, it is," the cowboy agreed. "I don't like it, but yesterday, I busted my string. Got to get a new one ready."

Slade nodded, his eyes contemplative. "I've a notion I can save yuh a heap of work, feller," he said. "I got a extra twine in my bag—one I picked up. It's a mite short for me. I pack a sixty-footer. I'll let yuh have it. See yuh run to under fifty feet."

He turned, halted the wrangler who was leading Shadow to the barn. He procured the rope in question from his saddle-bag and handed it to the cowboy, who eyed it with appreciation.

"Much obliged, feller," he said gratefully. "It's a plumb good lookin' twine. It—"

Suddenly his voice died. He stared at the rope, raised his glance to meet Slade's steady eyes. His face whitened.

Slade's next remark was seemingly irrelevant. "I never hold much to takin' dallies," he said. "I figger a tophand hasn't any business noosin' anything he figgers he might want to let go of. I believe in tyin' hard and fast. That way yuh can't lose yore clothes line. And sometimes the boss don't like it a bit if a feller loses his rope—by droppin' a loop on somethin' he hadn't ought to."

The cowboy gulped. Slade nodded pleasantly, turned and headed for the ranchhouse. The young puncher stared after him, the rope dangling from hands that twitched nervously.

As Slade mounted the veranda steps, Pierce Stuart came out the door.

"The little lady's gettin' freshed up a bit before we eat," he observed. He glanced about, lowered his voice. "Remember what I said in the sheriff's office the other day—about there not bein' a hoof of stock left in this valley by roundup time? Well, the hellions ain't wastin' no time. Night before last I lost a prime herd of nearly a hundred head. All fat beefs I was figgerin' on shippin'. Had 'em on my south pasture, where there's extra good grass. Yesterday mornin' there wasn't a patch of hair in sight."

"Figger they didn't stray?" Slade asked, his face grave.

"Nope, they didn't stray," Stuart declared positively. "They wouldn't have left that good grass, water and shade. Besides, we trailed 'em through the south pass, across the desert and to the river. It ain't far, yuh know. Lost 'em at the river, of course. There's outfits down there always waitin' to grab off wet cows and pay a good price for 'em."

Slade was silent for a moment. Then he asked a question.

"Would take mighty good herdin' to run a bunch that size through the pass and across the desert fast, wouldn't it?"

"Uh-huh, it would," Stuart admitted. "Prime herdin'."

"Sort of a hefty chore for a bunch of farmers, don't yuh think?"

Stuart fingered his chin. "Uh-huh," he admitted at last. "It would be. That's got me puzzled. But who else would it be?"

Slade's eyes held a retrospective look. He asked another question.

"Did yuh happen to notice the hosses the farmers rode here, Stuart?"

"Well, sort of," Stuart said. "I didn't get a good look at 'em. Sort of had the look of churn-heads to me."

"Did they look like top cutters or prime rope hosses or night hosses to you?"

"Shucks, no," Stuart growled. "I told yuh they looked to be nothin' better'n average crock-heads to me."

"Shore not the sort that could pick up a herd, bunch it proper and send it on the run in a straight line without losin' time?"

Stuart swore under his breath, but made no direct reply. Slade also stood silent for

a moment, gazing across the rangeland.

"Mighty nice spread yuh got here, Stuart," he remarked at length.

"Yes, it is," Stuart returned complacently, his gaze resting proudly on the grass-grown slopes.

"Uh-huh, mighty nice," Slade repeated. "The sort of a place a man can live on and be mighty happy. A fine land—lots of sunshine and fresh air. A mighty fine place to bring up kids right, for instance."

Stuart started, his eyes suddenly glowed.

"Uh-huh," he said. "It shore would be."

Slade glanced down at him. "Yuh're a lucky man, Stuart," he said. "Yuh've got most everything needed to make a man happy and content. And yuh don't want to share just a little bit of it with other folks who may want to be happy and prosperous—and bring up kids the right way."

PIERCE STUART turned from contemplating his broad acres. His gaze lifted, met the full force of Slade's steady gray eyes. Suddenly he flushed, his gaze dropped, wandered, came back suddenly to Slade's face.

"Slade," he said querulously, "yuh have the blamedest way of sayin' things. Yuh can make a feller feel so plumb low he can walk under a snake's belly without rufflin' a scale. Just who and what in blazes are yuh, anyhow?"

"Why?"

Stuart rasped his chin. "My old Mexican cook saw us ride up to the house," he said. "When I went back to the kitchen, he was grinnin' all over his face. I asked him what he was so happy about. Here's what he said: *'Patron,* now all will be well. *He* is here!' 'Who?' I asked. *'El Halcon!'* he said. *'El Halcon,* the just, the compassionate, the friend of the lowly.'

"Well, naturally that made me curious, so I asked, 'What do you know about *El Halcon,* Manuel? Who is he?' And the old jigger made a mighty funny answer, and the way he said it, I figger it's been said a lot of times before, by a lot of folks. It went somethin' like this: 'There are some, *patron,* who say, and they are evil men, that he is *el Diablo* himself, but others say, and they are many, that he is one of the blessed, come to earth to right its wrongs.' Slade, who are yuh, anyhow?"

But before Slade could reply, Pat's light step was heard crossing the room. She stood in the doorway, slim and graceful, and Pierce Stuart immediately forgot all about Walt Slade.

The meal that followed was a pleasant one, although Slade for the most part sat silent, his eyes brooding. But when they chanced to rest upon the man and the girl so intent upon one another, his expression was very, very pleased.

After they had finished eating, the horses were saddled and they rode on to town, arriving there rather late in the afternoon. A room was procured for Pat who at once set out making a round of the various shops. Rather to Slade's surprise, Pierce Stuart did not accompany her.

"Let's drop over to the Ace-Full Saloon," he suggested to Slade. "I figger there'll be a couple of gents there I want to talk with."

They entered the saloon, approached the bar. Stuart ordered drinks, then turned and surveyed the room. His gaze centered on a table at which sat two old cowmen.

"Back in a minute," he told Slade, and strode across the room to the table.

He sat down and what appeared to be an animated discussion followed, Stuart apparently urging some course of action, to which the others strongly objected. Finally Stuart's voice raised in anger and Slade heard the words.

"All right! Russell, I've done yuh more'n one favor, some of 'em purty big, and that goes for you, too, Boudin. If it wasn't for my dad and me, yuh wouldn't be settin' purty on yore Four T spread like yuh are. And now I ask one of you fellers a favor—not a big one either, and it don't cost yuh nothin'—and yuh figger to turn me down out of plumb ornery contrariness."

More discussion followed. Finally Boudin threw out his hands in resigned surrender. Russell shrugged his big shoulders despairingly. Stuart solemnly shook hands with each in turn. Then he arose and rejoined Slade.

"Well, I reckon that settles that," he said complacently. "I had to argue like all get-out with them two stubborn old horned toads, but I finally brought 'em around to my way of seein' things. They've agreed to let the farmers alone, and me and Hank Boudin and Charlie Russell just about run this valley."

This time it was Slade who shook hands with Stuart.

Slade went to bed that night feeling decidedly pleased. Pierce Stuart was riding over to Russell's to attend to some business, but promised to be back in town by noon the following day.

CHAPTER VII

The Play Called

DEVELOPMENTS the following morning, however, did not please Walt Slade at all. As he had ascertained, it was pay day for the spreads, and at an early hour the town was filled with cowhands in for a bust. And at the various saloons, heated discussions were soon under way.

Slade listened to several, and his black brows drew together. Finally he sought out Pat, told her to wait in town until he returned. He got the rig on Shadow and rode south at a fast clip.

In the town behind him, a group of some fifty cowhands were also looking to their riding gear. The Hawk was barely out of sight when a grim, heavily armed troop thundered out of town.

"Don't worry about the sheriff," a burly hand Stuart had introduced to Slade the day before as Vance Turner, his foreman, told his companions. "He's gone to Winslow for the day. They had some trouble up there last night. We'll have our chore all finished before he gets back. . . ."

Slade's face was even bleaker when he arrived at the north end of the farmers' wire. Instead of being at work, the grangers, rifles in evidence, were loafing about near the trail, wearing an air of grim expectancy. Craig Flood walked out to the trail as Slade drew rein.

There was nothing friendly about Flood's greeting. His mouth was hard set, his eyes glittering.

"Reckon yuh can keep right in ridin', Slade," he said harshly. "We don't aim to have no cowmen stoppin' off here today."

"And I don't reckon yuh have the say as to what I do or don't do, Flood," the Hawk challenged.

Craig Flood glared. His hand dropped to the butt of his heavy gun.

Slade's hands did not move. His voice did not raise, but the words he spoke hit the other man with the impact of a driven fist.

"Don't try it, Flood," he cautioned. "If yuh do, yuh won't use that hand for three months. Now get back there with yore folks. Yuh're not havin' any range war in this country if I can prevent it, and I figger I can. Get back, I say!"

Flood hesitated, his face gray with rage, but there was that in *El Halcon's* eyes that forced him to obedience. He turned, muttering under his breath, and returned to his fellows, who stood silently watching.

Slade turned his horse to face to the north. He fished out the "makin's," rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand and sat smoking, one long leg hooked comfortably over the saddle horn. He did not move when around the bend bulged the hard riding cowboys, hands close to their guns.

As Slade showed no disposition to move from the trail which he blocked, the cowboys jostled to a halt a few yards distant. Foremost, Slade noted, was Vance Turner, the Forked S foreman. Beside him rode the young cowboy who had accepted the rope from Slade the day before.

"Have a nice ride?" Slade asked casually. "Reckon yuh've traveled enough for one day, though, so suppose yuh turn around and head back the way yuh come."

The cowboys stared, nonplussed. Vance Turner finally blustered:

"We know yuh, Slade. We know yuh're *El Halcon,* and plumb pizen, but we're down here to do a chore, and yuh ain't stoppin' us!"

"Mebbe," Slade agreed composedly, suddenly straightening in the saddle, the thumbs of his hands hooked over his cartridge belts. "Mebbe. I reckon the odds against me are a mite heavy, but one thing is shore. Turner, you and that fence-post ropin' gent beside yuh, and a few others will stop here, and for good. I'm callin' yore play. So fill yore hand or throw in yore cards."

The cowboys sat their horses rigid, their eyes watchful, their hands still. There was nothing equivocal about the challenge hurled in their teeth. They knew Slade meant exactly what he said. They could get him, all right. One shot would do it, but they knew that before he died, other

men would die, and each man there had an uneasy premonition that he might be one of the gents singled out for attention by *El Halcon's* flaming guns. It seemed ridiculous for one man to out-face fifty, but still they hesitated.

Vance Turner's face was darkly red with held-in passion. The young puncher beside him looked decidedly uneasy, and not at all sure of himself. The others evidently looked to the two for leadership.

Slade knew that the situation was deadly. One misinterpreted move would drench the valley in blood. The cowboys, well "likkered up" and in a belligerent mood, might cut loose at any moment.

BEHIND him stood the lines of the farmers, gripping their rifles. Slade could hear the voice of Craig Flood muttering to them, and in that voice he felt lay more danger than in the guns of the cowhands blocking the trail.

Then with unexpected suddenness came a diversion. All heads turned at the sound of fast hoofs drumming the ground. Across the prairie from the northeast was racing a great sorrel horse, his golden coat flecked with foam. And forking that horse was the maddest man Walt Slade had ever seen.

It was Pierce Stuart. He came pounding up to the trail, bellowing curses. Straight for the milling cowboys he charged. With one sweep of his big fist he knocked Vance Turner out of saddle and sprawling in the dust. His other fist sent the young cowboy to join Turner on the ground. Stuart leaped from his saddle and stood over the prostrate pair, fists doubled.

"Yuh cussed coyotes!" he roared. "Who gave yuh permission to come down here and start a ruckus? Get on yore feet and I'll skin yuh up till folks won't know yuh from a fresh hide! I'll kick yore pants up around yore neck so tight they'll choke yuh to death! Stand up, I say!"

But the pair preferred to remain where they were.

"Lay off, boss!" wailed Turner. "We didn't aim to do nothin' wrong. We thought—"

"Who told yuh yuh could think!" bellowed Stuart. "If I paid yuh to think, yuh wouldn't draw down a busted peso in a year!"

He whirled to face the other hands, and shook his fist at them.

"And as for you hellions," he bawled, "I'll take care of you later, and the rest of yuh have got yores comin'! Hank Boudin and Charlie Russell are followin' on my tail, and they'll have somethin' to say to you sun-dodgers who work for 'em. Here they come now!"

But the Bradded R and Four T punchers in the band did not wait to meet their irate employers, who could now be seen bobbing across the range in their direction. They turned tail and streaked it back the way they had come.

By the time Boudin and Russell foamed up to the trail, the cowhands were around a bend and out of sight. With them departed the battered Vance Turner and his followers.

Stuart watched them go without comment. He nodded to Slade and, fanning himself with his hat, strode across to the astonished grangers.

"Any of you jiggers got somethin' to drink handy?" he demanded. "I'm sort of het up."

A grinning farmer produced a jug. "Prime old stuff all the way from Kentucky," he said.

Stuart tilted the jug and took a long swig. He smacked his lips, passed the jug to Boudin and Russell, who also swallowed deeply. Walt Slade smiled, and shook his head.

"And now," said Stuart, "I reckon we can all get back to work. I've got things to do, and if you fellers don't stop picnickin' around like this yuh're goin' to be late with yore plantin'. Frost comes earlier down here sometimes than yuh figger."

Slade glanced about in search of Craig Flood. He was nowhere in sight.

As Slade and Stuart rode away, the rancher explained his appearance on the scene in the nick of time.

"Manuel, my Mexican cook, brought word to me in town of what was in the wind," Stuart explained. "Boudin and Russell and I took a short cut and got here quick as we could, but if it hadn't been for you, Slade, I reckon we'd have been too late. Well, mebbe things will be peaceful hereabouts from now on."

Slade chuckled. "Sort of reminds me of what happened in England nigh onto a thousand years back," he remarked.

"How's that?"

"Well," Slade replied, "after the Normans swooped down on the Saxons like forty hen hawks on a settin' quail and hog-tied 'em, there was a heap of trouble for quite a spell. But gradually the ruckus raisin' quieted down. Why? Because the Normans found the Saxon gals sort of good to look at, and the other way around. So first thing the uppity gents over there knew, they were fighting the wife's relations, and that didn't work. Get the point?"

Stuart, grinning a trifle sheepishly, said, "I got the point."

As they neared town, Stuart asked a question.

"What I'd like to know," he remarked, "is who *is* wideloopin' my cows?"

"That's still to be taken care of," Slade said grimly. "We'll have a talk with the sheriff when he gets back from Winslow."

The found Terlingua active when they arrived, but the activity was of a subdued nature. When the Forked S owner, in Slade's company, entered the Ace-Full Saloon and glowered about, the talk in the big room fell flat.

LEAVING Slade at the bar, Stuart began circulating among the groups. Some time later he rejoined the Hawk.

"Well," he said, "I got the lowdown on what set the boys off so this mornin'. Somehow or other a loco yarn got goin' around that the farmers aimed to take over the open land in the pass down at the south end of the valley and fence off the pass so's nobody could use it. A plumb loco notion, of course. There's an open trail through the pass to join up with the Sonora Trail, and anybody with any savvy knows yuh can't fence off an open trail in this State. But the squirrel-brained hellions fell for it."

Slade nodded, apparently little surprised at the information.

"Stuart," he remarked, "didn't it strike yuh sort of funny that the farmers had all left their work and had bunched up north of their wire all set for trouble? Looks like they had a notion somethin' was due to bust loose today."

"By gosh, yuh're right!" Stuart exclaimed. "I didn't think of it, but it *was* funny. They must have got word the boys was headin' that way."

"And the boys was just gettin' set to move when I rode out of town about two jumps ahead of 'em," Slade observed. "Somebody must have moved almighty fast, or sort of knew in advance what to expect."

Stuart stared at him, but *El Halcon* did not see fit to elaborate.

A little later somebody remarked that Sheriff Allen had got in from Winslow and was in his office.

"Suppose we drop over there for a little pow-wow?" Slade suggested.

They found the sheriff in his office, and in a bad temper. He glared at Slade accusingly.

"I've a notion you're at the bottom of this somehow, yuh long-legged hellion," he accused, holding out a sheet of yellow paper to the Hawk. "I just got a answer to my wire to McNelty over at Ranger Post headquarters. Read it! It's the dad-blamedest thing I ever saw. I've knowed that spavined old coot for forty years. I always did figger him to be a mite loco, and now I know it!"

Slade read the offending message, a grin twitching at the corners of his mouth. He handed it to Stuart. The ranch owner read:

EL HALCON THERE. YOU DON'T NEED ANY TROOP.

McNELTY

Slade sat down opposite the sheriff. Stuart stared from the telegraph message to the Hawk in bewilderment. The sheriff mentioned certain regions not noted for a salubrious climate, relative to his opinion of Captain Jim McNelty. Slade chuckled. He was fumbling at a cunningly concealed secret pocket in his broad leather belt. He laid something on the table between them.

Sheriff Allen stared, his jaw dropping. So did Pierce Stuart. The object was a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle the feared and honored badge of the Texas Rangers!

The sheriff recovered first. "What in blazes are *you* doin' with a Ranger badge?" he demanded querulously.

"Got it along with my appointment and commission, some years back," Slade replied.

The sheriff gulped. "*El Halcon* a Texas

Ranger! If this don't beat anythin' I ever heard tell of! Well, I always figgered Jim McNelty was a darned smart hombre, and now I know it. And he sent yuh over here to straighten things out, did he?"

Slade shook his black head. "Nope, I just happened along. I was headin' back for the post, takin' a cut by way of a trail I was told would save me a heap of ridin'. That's how I happened into Palermo Valley. When I saw how things were shapin' up here, I figgered I ought to stick around for a spell. That's why I asked yuh to tell Captain Jim I was here. Sort of wanted his go-ahead. Reckon I got it."

"Reckon yuh did," grunted the sheriff. "And I reckon old Jim knew what he was about, as he usually does, when he allowed we didn't need a troop here. Uh-huh, from what I've heard tell about what happened here today, I reckon he was plumb right. *El Halcon* a Texas Ranger!"

"Yes, undercover man for McNelty's company," Slade explained. He stowed the silver badge out of sight. "And I reckon you understand if it should get known I'm a Ranger, I wouldn't be near so much good to the outfit."

BOTH men nodded understanding.

"We'll keep tight latigos on our jaws," Stuart assured him.

"And now, Stuart," Slade said, "we'll take up what we was discussin' this evenin' when we hit town. About the cows yuh're losin'. I figger if somethin' ain't done, you and others hereabouts are due to lose a lot more, and other things are liable to happen."

"Yuh figger yuh know the hellion responsible?" interrupted the sheriff.

"Yes," Slade replied, "I figger I do. But knowin' and provin' are two different things. I haven't got anything on him that would stand up in court. He's a cold proposition with plenty of savvy, and droppin' a loop on him won't be easy. Right now his twine is a mite kinked, but he can still twirl a wide noose. However, there's a weak spot in his corral—somethin' that's caused more'n one smart owlhoot to get his come-uppance."

"How's that?" asked the sheriff.

"His bunch," Slade said, "has sorta of got used to easy money and plenty of it, I figger. When they start getting low in *dinero,* either he'll have to fill their pockets for 'em or they'll start swallerforkin' on their own. If they are like what his sort usually gets together, he can't afford to take a chance on that.

"It would be almighty risky to try another stage holdup, the way the shipments are guarded since that one last month. There's no chance with the banks in this section. He likely has a good market all set for wet cows. Now if a nice fat herd is got together for a sudden shipping order, and not too well looked after, I figger he'll make a try for it.

"So we'll just set a little trap for that owlhootin' gent. Tomorrow I figger to ride down and give that south pass a once-over. There should be some place in there where we can swoop down on him if he comes shovin' a herd through."

"Sounds reasonable," the sheriff admitted, "but don't take no chances. I got a feelin' that hellion is as wise as a tree full of owls. . . ."

Slade rode back to the Hale farm with Pat the following morning. Pierce Stuart accompanied them part of the way, then turned off for his *casa,* after a lingering good-by.

"I've got a notion that big ranchhouse is a mighty nice place to live," Slade observed smilingly as they watched Stuart's broad back vanish over a rise.

Pat colored, but did not see fit to reply.

Slade went to bed early, but a couple of hours before dawn, he stole silently from the farmhouse and got the rig on Shadow. He mounted and rode south in a most complacent frame of mind.

"I figger we'll tangle that jigger's string for him, feller," he told the horse.

But for once at least, *El Halcon* underestimated the shrewdness of his opponent.

CHAPTER VIII

Trail's End

GRAY dawn was just beginning to tint the east as Slade climbed the slope and entered the pass. The gorge was wide at the mouth—a good ten miles, Slade estimated—but it narrowed rapidly, with the cliff walls on either side, increasing in height. Before he had covered three miles it had dwin-

dled to canyon proportions and was gloomy, although the sun was now well above the horizon.

Another mile and the canyon became a passage only a few hundred yards in width, with the cliffs, cracked and broken and overhanging, soaring up for hundreds of feet. The trail ran close to the east wall, which was badly shattered, with jutting masses of veined and fissured rock hanging ominously over the track.

"Wouldn't want to amble through here in the springtime, when the thaws begin," Slade mused. "I've a notion a bad freeze after a warm spell might loosen some of the chunks up there. Shore wouldn't be comfortable to be under one when it came down."

Indeed there was ample evidence of falls in the past. The ground was littered with fragments, boulders and huge masses, through which the talus trail snaked its way. Growth bristled between the stones. Over to the left Slade could hear a tinkle of water.

He rode slowly now, examining the terrain with careful eyes.

"Looks like somewheres along here ought to be the right place," he told Shadow as they veered around a bend. "A herd would have to slow up with all these crooks and turns, and have to string out, for the trail narrows here and there's no travelin' on either side of it.

"Tell you what, feller. We'll amble you over to that crik we can hear. Ought to be some grass there. Yuh can just take it easy while I give this place a good goin' over. Want to find a good hole-up for the sheriff and the boys, where we can wait comfortable for them gents to come stringing along. May have to spend quite a few nights down here before somethin' breaks."

As he suspected, there was good grass on the banks of the little stream purling through the center of the gorge. He made Shadow comfortable and returned to the trail. He climbed onto a huge boulder and began studying the terrain.

Abruptly he tensed in an attitude of listening. His keen ears had caught a sound, the clash of a horses' iron on a stone. He glanced toward the trail bend less than a hundred yards to the north. Around the bend bulged Craig Flood and his six cowhands.

"Get him!" roared Flood as he sighted the Hawk's tall form on the boulder.

Slade went off the boulder with lead screeching all around him. He slithered to its edge and sent a stream of slugs hissing toward the charging owlhoots. A man threw up his hands and pitched from the saddle. The others jerked their horses to a dancing halt.

"Take cover!" boomed Flood, hurling himself to the ground.

Before Slade could line sights again, the owlhoots were out of sight behind fragments of stone. Bullets whined past the boulder as Slade dodged in back of it.

Stuffing fresh cartridges into his sixes, Slade listened to the crackle of gunshots and the smack of slugs against the boulder. He glanced around, but behind him was a wide open space affording practically no cover. To the right was the open trail. To the left was thick growth, but a clear space of some thirty yards in width separated him from its sanctuary.

Slade knew he was in a precarious

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position. He might hold out through the hours of daylight, but when the gorge grew gloomy, it would be easy for the owlhoots to encircle him. Even now one or more might be sliding through the growth to take him on the flank.

The hidden men in front were keeping up a hot fire. To step from the shelter of the boulder would be nothing less than suicide. Squatting back on his heels, his eyes shooting in all directions, *El Halcon* took stock of the situation.

"Mebbe I can trick 'em into showin' themselves," he muttered, slipping his hat from his head and balancing it on the barrel of one of his guns.

Cautiously he thrust the hat beyond the edge of the boulder. A thundering volley burst forth. The hat went sailing through the air. Slade grabbed for it, caught it and jammed it on his head as he slid toward the edge of the boulder. Then he froze in the very midst of action.

From far above boomed a mighty cracking and splitting. Slade's glance shot upward. He saw a great mass of overhanging stone lean slowly and majestically out from the parent cliff. The vibrations set up by the concentrated gunfire had loosened the shattered overhang.

DOWN it rushed, a vast shadow of destruction. From the doomed outlaws came terrified screams that was instantly drowned in a crash like a thousand thunderclaps.

Shaking in every limb, a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach, Walt Slade stared at the rising dust cloud. He stepped back, glancing to the left as a slight crackling sound smote his ears. He hurled himself sideward and down. Lining sights from the edge of the growth was Craig Flood.

Slade felt the hot burn of Flood's bullet creasing his ribs as he hit the ground. A second slug knocked chips of rock into his face. Then both his guns let go with a rattling crash.

Craig Flood reeled back as if struck by a mighty fist. His gun dropped from his hand, he spun around and fell, to lie motionless on his face.

Gun ready for instant action, Slade approached the fallen owlhoot. Flood did not move. Slade knelt beside him and turned him over on his back.

Flood was still alive and conscious. He breathed in hoarse gasps. There was a froth of blood on his thin lips. His cheeks had fallen in till the bones stood out like those of a skull. He stared up at Slade with eyes from which the hot glare had vanished. They were tired and melancholy eyes, like the eyes of a sick child.

"Take it easy," Slade cautioned as the wounded man strove to speak. "I'll do what I can for yuh, Flood."

He bared the stricken man's chest, revealing a blue hole just above the heart, that oozed a few drops of blood.

"Yuh can't do nothin'," Flood gasped hoarsely. "I'm bleedin' to death inside. Just a matter of minutes. Well, mebbe yuh'll have better luck in takin' over than I had. I'd ought to took yuh in with me, 'stead of fightin' yuh."

Slade slowly shook his head. "Yuh had me branded wrong all the time, Flood," he said. He held the silver star of the Rangers before the dying man's eyes.

Flood gazed at the star, nodded almost imperceptibly.

"I'd ought to knowed it," he panted. "Yuh're just what them Rangers fellers aim to be and usually are."

"Yuh figgered to take over the valley, Flood?"

"Uh-huh, that was my notion. I figgered if I set the farmers against 'em strong, sooner or later the cowmen would pull out."

"It would have been considerable of a chore."

"Uh-huh, but if yuh keep chippin' at a rock long enough, yuh wear it down. I aimed to take over, and go straight. I went straight once before. Over Arizona way. Had me a nice little spread. The big fellers crowded me out. Hated 'em ever since."

"And figgered to get even?"

"Uh-huh. Bad business, gettin' even. Never pays. Don't ever try it. I—tried—and—did—wrong!"

His eyes closed wearily. His chest arched as he fought for air, fell in. It did not rise again.

Walt Slade stood up. He gazed down at the dead man for a moment, sighed deeply, and went to get his horse.

After making sure that nothing was to be done for the men of Flood's outfit,

Slade rode north. He turned off at Hale's farmhouse for something to eat, and acquainted the old farmer with what had happened. Jethro shook his head sadly.

"Craig Flood!" he said. "I never would have figgered him to be mixed up in anythin' like that. I figgered him for a hard man, but not that sort."

"Yes, hard and bitter," Slade said. "I figger he started ridin' the crooked trail mighty young. That's why I first suspected him. He tried to cover up where he came from."

"How's that?"

"Well, he claimed to come from Kentucky. But he didn't talk like a Kentuckian. He talked more like a New Englander who had been in the Southwest for a lot of years and had picked up the drawl down here. But he never forgot some expressions. I never knew a Kentuckian to say such things as 'callate' and 'how be you?' and so on. That's Down East talk. And I've learned that a jigger who tries to cover up where he originally comes from will bear watchin'. But it was the night that fool cowhand set off the bomb he had planted under his fence that I got my first real lowdown on him."

"Yes?"

SLADE paused to roll a cigarette before replying.

"That night," he explained, then, "Flood and his bunch got there almost before the smoke had cleared. He let on that him and his hands had been in bed asleep when the thing went off. But they had all their clothes on, even to their hats, and their horses were under full rig. I knew they must have been up and gettin' ready to ride somewhere. Then that very same night, Pierce Stuart's cows were widelooped, and widelooped in a way that could only be done by experienced cowmen with mighty good hosses. Flood's hands were cowmen, all right, and their hosses were the best.

"Of course he kept a few cows on his spread to cover up his bunch of owlhoots, but he slipped there a mite. He had altogether too many hands for the job. It looked funny to somebody who knew the cow business. Plantin' the bomb the way he did showed he was a cold-blooded killer. It also showed he didn't care how much he riled up the ranchers. That was what he wanted to do.

"An old game—settin' factions against one another. If it came to a real shootin' range war, the valley would have been just about cleaned out. That's what happened in the Lincoln County war, and others. Flood had plenty of bone up his back and was willing to take big chances to get what he wanted. He was smart, too, gettin' in with the farmers the way he did. Workin' on their religious convictions and settin' up as a sort of leader along such lines. Smart, and plumb bad."

"And I reckon he cooked up that row that so night busted loose between the farmers and the cowboys the other day?" asked Hale.

"Yes," Slade replied. "That's what made me certain of him. The whole business was carefully planned, that was plain. And as soon as it didn't work, Flood sneaked out of sight. He was smart enough to know that he'd lost hold on the farmers, and with Pierce Stuart and his friends workin' to cool things down, his scheme was no good any more.

"Yes, he was plumb smart," Slade repeated with a chuckle. "If I hadn't had luck this mornin', he would have shore outsmarted *me*. All the time I figgered I was settin' a trap for him, he was settin' one for me. Was keepin' an eye on me every minute, and when I rode away from the house this mornin', he trailed right along after me, figgerin' to do me in down at the pass. Mighty nigh got away with it, too. But he didn't quite make his throw, and everything worked out."

He stood up, smiling down from his great height.

"Sorry I can't stay for the weddin', Pat," he told the girl, "but I got some chores that can't wait. I'm ridin' up to tell the sheriff what happened, and then I'll keep on amblin'. Hope to see yuh all again some time, though."

They watched him ride away, thrumming the strings of his guitar, the little devils of laughter gay in his eyes, his rich voice singing a hauntingly beautiful love song of Old Spain.

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Next Month: MERRANO OF THE DRY COUNTRY, Novelet by Louis L'Amour

GAMBLING

an action novelet

CHAPTER I

Bank Failure

HE CAME into the booming town of Gleeper on the noon train from the east, a tall slender man, tired from his long trip but glad to be back. He was glad, also, to get away from the false atmosphere of Hilton, Missouri.

Hilton was his home town. Each year he visited the place, in November, for the sake of old times, and because they were proud of him there and proud of the things he did, like donating a hundred turkeys to the orphanage so that every homeless kid might be gorged to the gills with roast turkey and dressing and mashed potatoes and gravy. In Hilton, they thought he was a rich Western mining man.

For ten years he had been making these

MAN

by Robert Moore Williams

Malone lifted Jenkins from the floor, dropped him and fell with him

No stakes were too big for Bud Malone, who was prepared to take a chance on anything—and lose gamely!

trips, ever since he had become prosperous enough to afford them. Going to Hilton always made him uncomfortable, but he always went.

The train rumbled to a stop with a screech of brakes. He stepped off, handing the grinning porter a silver dollar. Hacks were waiting.

"Hey, Mr. Malone!" drivers were shouting at him. "Hey, Bud Malone!"

He shook his head at them and picked up his bags. He would walk to his hotel. He wanted to get the feel of Western ground under his feet again, to get his lungs full of Western air.

There was the usual flurry of excite-

ment at train time. People nodded to him. However, it seemed there was not quite the usual rush to see the train come in, and on his way to his hotel, he saw that changes had been made in his absence. Two stores were closed, their front doors locked. Glass had been broken in a restaurant window and in an alley he caught a glimpse of a wagon turned upside down.

He entered his hotel. The lobby was empty. The clerk looked up over his desk and got quickly to his feet, a smile on his face.

"Mr. Malone! Glad to see yuh back, sir. Did yuh have a nice trip?"

"Thanks, Sam. A very nice trip, thank you. May I have my key, please?"

The clerk seemed flustered. A person less sensitive than Malone might not have noticed that the clerk had to look twice to find the key that was in the box in front of him. Nor did the clerk notice the mail beside it.

"Yes?" Malone said, encouragingly.

The clerk swallowed and glanced toward the front door, a furtive sidelong look that had some of the wariness of the wild animal in it.

"Tom Harris, that runs the Alhambra Saloon, has been looking for yuh, wantin' to know when you'll be back."

If the name meant anything to Malone, his features did not reveal the fact.

"Thanks, Sam. There's some mail for me, I believe."

"Yes, sir."

The clerk saw the letters then. Malone took them from him, put them in his pocket without looking at them.

"Have somebody bring up my bags, please."

HE WENT upstairs, unlocked his room, and entered. The room was the same, quiet and restful. He sank down in the overstuffed chair. It was nice to be back. Visiting Hilton was always a strain and he was always glad to return here to this Western mining country where they knew him for what he was.

The letters crinkled in his pocket, reminding him of their presence. He pulled them out. The first one bore the legend "HILTON ORPHANAGE." That would be Miss Effie writing to thank him for the turkeys and for the five-hundred-dollar check he had donated to the orphanage to meet pressing bills. He opened the letter. A check fell out of it.

His check, drawn on the Bank of Gleeper, in the amount of five hundred dollars.

The letter read:

Dear Bud Malone:

Mr. Carson called me as I was passing the bank today and gave me your check, which he said had been returned to our bank for non-payment because of failure of the Bank of Gleeper. He joins me in expressing our regret at your misfortune and in expressing our hope that the loss of funds in the failure of your bank may not be too serious a blow to you.

When you grew up and went West, it was with my blessing and ten dollars. I know that I have been repaid a thousand times, not only in money but in the knowledge that I have helped a boy grow into a kindly, thoughtful, successful, and generous-hearted man. Good luck.

Sincerely,
Effie Ingram

There was, in the moment when he finished reading his letter, sweat on "Bud" Malone's face and sweat on his body and sweat in his soul. Bank failure! He had known nothing of this. But, of course, he couldn't have known. After leaving Hilton, he had gone to St. Louis and spent two pleasant weeks there. During the time he had been gone, the bank had failed.

Exclusive of outstanding checks, he had had eight thousand dollars on deposit in that bank. Gone! With the exception of the cash in his money-belt, it was all the money he had in the world.

Stripping off his coat, he examined his supply of cash. Less than two hundred dollars!

He had spent money in Hilton and in St. Louis, having a good time.

Anyhow, he thought wryly, he wasn't broke. Not quite. Then he remembered Harris had been looking for him.

He washed his hands and face and changed his shirt and waited for the porter to bring his bags. When they came up, he opened them, took from them his Colt and the shoulder harness. He inspected the gun, made certain it was loaded and in proper working order.

In Missouri, and on his trip, he had not worn the gun. Or needed to. When he left his room now the gun was under his coat.

The clerk did not need to refresh his

memory to recall the exact date the bank had failed.

"It was the thirteenth, Mr. Malone."

"I left on the twelfth, a Thursday."

"Yes, Mr. Malone."

"I just learned about the failure. What caused it?"

"Nobody knows. A run started. Mr. Martins, the president, before he—Mr. Martins said somebody started a rumor that the bank was failin'. He claimed the bank was in fine shape, but of course when all the depositors turned up at the same time and demanded their money, there was nothin' to do but close the doors. We had trouble—"

"I saw an overturned wagon and a broken window."

"Yes. Well—"

"I also saw some closed stores."

The clerk nodded, sadness and misery on his face. "Lots of people here were bad hurt, and some of the merchants were forced to close up. It was a sad affair. I lost my savin's too."

"I'm sorry to hear that but perhaps most of the loss, maybe all of it, may be recovered. I know Fred Martins. He'll pay off his depositors' loss if it takes the rest of his life."

"I'm afraid he won't, sir."

"Why not? There isn't a straighter, honester man in this country."

"I know." The clerk coughed. "Haven't yuh heard? He's dead."

"What?"

"A mob formed, sir. The sheriff tried to stop 'em but he was shot, as was one of his deputies. The wagon you saw—Mr. Martins was placed in it before he was hung."

"*Hung?* Fred Martins hung?" He was incredulous.

The clerk shook his head. "I know it sounds impossible, but it happened. The people went crazy." A shiver passed over the clerk's frail body at the memory.

MALONE was silent. Tragedy had stalked here in this town while he had been gone. tragedy that made his own loss seem unimportant. He had known Fred Martins, the bank president, for a straight shooter.

The clerk coughed. "The next day after the bank failed, Harris was lookin' for yuh, Mr. Malone."

"Has he been in recently?" Malone said.

"About a week ago." The clerk glanced again toward the front door and leaned across the desk. "I don't want to meddle in yore private affairs, but—"

"You aren't prying. I appreciate your interest."

"Well—" The clerk hesitated, then plunged. "Two other people have been lookin' for yuh, too. One of 'em is a man by the name of Jenkins. I believe he's a gunman, and I also believe he is hired by Harris."

"Thank you," Malone said. "I know Jenkins." If the name meant anything to him, his face gave no indication of it. "Who was the other person?"

"A lady, sir."

"A lady?"

"Yes, sir."

The front door creaked as it was opened and the clerk's eyes darted in this direction. The look of apprehension that had been on his face vanished in a smile.

"Here she is now!"

A girl was coming across the lobby. Malone had the impression of a mass of brown hair piled high above a forehead, of a pair of startlingly blue eyes looking serenely out of a brown face. She was becomingly, if inexpensively, dressed.

To the best of his knowledge, he had never seen her before in his life. But she looked straight at him and knew him. For a moment, he had the dazed impression that he had known this woman in some other world, in some other life.

It wasn't possible that he had met her before. His memory for faces was hawk-keen. But she knew him the instant she saw him. She came straight to him. And she had been asking for him.

"Mr. Malone, I am Lucy Brown. I would like to talk to you."

She held out her hand and he took it. Her grip was firm and strong, like the grip of a man, with a man's sure revelation of character in it.

He bowed. "It is a pleasure, Miss Brown." He meant what he said, and his face, usually so completely under control, revealed that he did. "What did you wish to see me about?"

Out of the corner of her eyes, she glanced at the clerk. "About a matter of importance, Mr. Malone."

The clerk coughed, embarassed that he had been caught listening, and withdrew behind his desk.

CHAPTER II

Unexpected Friend

LUCY BROWN walked across the lobby and Malone followed her.

"Have I ever met you, Miss Brown?" he asked, puzzled again with his fleeting impression of recognition.

"I have been in town a little more than a month, Mr. Malone. You may have seen me, or my sign, 'Lucy Brown's Photographic Shop.'"

Malone smiled. He was certain he hadn't seen Lucy Brown during the month she had been in Gleeper, but he had seen her sign.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Over the Alhambra Saloon."

He still had no idea what this serenely beautiful girl wanted to tell him or ask him. Something of importance, she had said. Whatever it was, he was pleased that she would even notice him, let alone seek him out.

He was aware of a vague wish forming inside of him, a wish that he rigorously excluded from his mind. To a man in his business, beautiful girls were merely—beautiful girls.

"I sleep in the rear of my photographic shop," she said. "As you know, that is directly above the rear rooms of the Alhambra."

"Yes." He nodded.

"About ten days ago, I was awakened one night by the sound of voices coming from one of the rooms beneath me. The window in my room was open and so was the window of the room below me. Two men were talking down there. I think the fact that they were trying to talk quietly is what awakened me. I've grown so accustomed to the noise that I probably would not have heard them if they had been shouting. But they were trying to talk softly, and about you, Mr. Malone."

He nodded again. "Go on, please."

"One of the men, a man with a heavy, rumbling bass voice, said, 'That bank crash may work out lucky after all. It sure put Malone right where I want him.'" She looked at him, as if she was expecting a reaction. Finding none, she said, "You don't seem to believe me?"

He smiled. "Don't judge me by the expression on my face."

Her eyes went over him and he saw doubt come into them, as though she had seen something she was not certain she liked.

"This man said, "I'm holding his check for two thousand dollars. I really hooked him in a game the night before he left. Now he can't pay off on that check. That's where you come in, Jenkins. I want you to collect that check for me.' Does this mean anything to you, Mr. Malone?"

"It means a great deal," he said gravely. "And I appreciate your telling me. Was that all?"

"Not quite. The other man asked how he was going to collect if you were broke."

"What did Harris say to that?"

"Harris? Do you know these men?"

"Well enough. Harris is the name of the one with the bass voice. What did he say?"

"He told Jenkins to tell you that you had five days to pay off on your bad check and that if you didn't pay up, you would be killed. From the way he talked, I think he meant it." Her eyes were on him, watching him, searching his face for an expresion of an emotion.

He shrugged. "Harris meant it all right," he said wryly.

"How do you expect to pay this—debt?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. Did you hear anything else?"

"One other thing. The man with the bass voice said that after you were scared bad enough, he would offer to turn over your bad check for the stock shares you own in the Yellow Jacket Mine."

"What? The Yellow Jacket?" He had to think to remember whether or not he owned such a piece of property. "Oh, yes. I won—I own some stock in the Yellow Jacket. Took it in—ah—for a debt. But so far as I know, the stock is worthless."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not sure of anything, except that I owe you my most sincere thanks for bringing me this information. May I ask you why you went to all this trouble to warn me, a stranger?"

He was not certain but he thought he

saw a trace of a flush on her face. Her eyes remained serene.

"I would do as much for anyone, Mr. Malone. As to the debt—" The serenity went out of her eyes and was replaced by the shadow of fear. "Perhaps this is none of my business, Mr. Malone, but I think I know a way you can evade payment."

"Eh?" He was startled.

The shadow deepened in her eyes. "You are a gambler, are you not?"

"Eh!" He choked over the sound. Something like panic was inside of him. "Yes."

WATCHING him, she smiled, and he had the impression this time she had seen something she liked.

"A professional gambler," she went on.

"Yes," he said.

He felt again the touch of discomfort he always felt in Hilton, Missouri. In Hilton they did not know his real occupation. They thought he was a successful Western mining man and were proud of him. He wondered what they would think of him if they knew he was a professional gambler? What would Miss Effie think? The pressure of old thoughts moved in him.

"And this check was given to cover a gambling debt?" Lucy Brown went on.

"Yes."

"Then why pay it?" she said. "Gambling debts are not legally collectable."

"I beg your pardon!" Surprise was a shock in him, surprise that she should even think of such a thing. "A debt is a debt," he said, stiffness creeping into his voice.

"But you don't have to pay it."

"On the other hand, it is the one debt I must pay."

"You mean, because of Jenkins?"

"Jenkins does not enter into the situation. I am a gambler, I admit, but for that one reason, I have to pay my debt."

He wondered why women had difficulty in understanding about debts of honor. He didn't know much about women because in his business women were, and could only be, the pleasant companions of an evening. A woman who loved a man, who shared his fortunes, who bore and raised his children, such a woman could not be a part of his life because he felt that no professional gambler could offer a woman security.

About women as wives, he knew nothing. He had kept such thoughts out of his mind. But somehow or other he had expected Lucy Brown to understand about a debt of honor.

Her smile was full of meaning. "I hoped you would say that, Mr. Malone."

"You hoped! Then why did you suggest such a thing?"

The smile grew and something of yearning showed in it. For an instant it reminded him of the faces of all the little girls he had known when he was in the Hilton orphanage, on Christmas morning, hopeful that they would receive presents but fearing they would not.

"Perhaps I wanted to see what you would say. Good day, Mr. Malone."

She turned. Her skirts swished as she walked across the lobby toward the front door.

"Wait, please!" he called. She turned at his words. "I want to thank you—"

"You are very welcome." She turned again.

"And to ask you—"

"Yes, Mr. Malone?"

For a moment, in the face of her smile, he lost his poise. Should he ask her what he had in mind, knowing the possible consequences of his action, knowing that any man who associated for long with Lucy Brown would be almost certain to fall in love with her?

He had never permitted himself the luxury of falling in love. Should he take a chance with this one? He didn't know. It was like opening a pot blind, like paying for cards before you drew them. You might get a pair of aces, you might get—nothing.

For a second he was silent, considering this problem, then he plunged.

"The hotel dining room has excellent food, Miss Brown. I—I wonder if you would care to have supper with me tonight?"

Her face was the face of all the little girls on earth on Christmas morning, as he spoke. Then the smile went away.

"It is my turn to thank you, Mr. Malone, and to say no."

He didn't know what to say. "You came to warn me—"

"But that does not necessarily mean I am willing to have supper with you. Good day, Mr. Malone."

The door swung shut behind her. He

knew from her face that she had wanted to accept his invitation, yet she had said no.

He wondered whether he had rushed her too fast. He thought that this was probably the reason. She was a girl who put a value on herself.

THE door opened again—to admit a man with buck teeth in a crooked face.

Behind the desk the friendly clerk was seized with a hasty coughing spell. Malone did not need this warning to recognize the man coming through the door. The buck teeth, the crooked face, the slouching walk, the bulge of the gun under the coat, these things told him that this was Jenkins.

His talk with Jenkins was short and to the point.

"The boss says yuh got twenty-four hours to make good on that check," Jenkins said.

"I had thought I might have a little longer," Malone said.

Jenkins grinned. He was enjoying seeing this superior gambler, this man who played for high stakes in games from which he was excluded, sweat. Only Malone wasn't sweating.

"The boss changed his mind," Jenkins said. "He said this is the only warnin' yuh get."

That ought to put the sweats on him, Jenkins thought. His mind was as twisted as his face. He enjoyed seeing others suffer.

"Take this message to Harris," Malone said. "That I acknowledge the debt and that it will be paid as soon as possible, within a week, I hope. Then tell him for me, that he can go to blazes. After that, tell him if he wants to scare me, he had better hire a tougher gunman than you. Now get out."

Of the two men, it was Jenkins who developed the sweats.

"Twenty-four hours!" he snarled.

Malone, not answering, watched him slouch out of the hotel.

Behind the desk, the clerk was about to choke.

"He—that man has killed two men, to my knowledge!" the clerk gasped. "And you told him to go to blazes!"

"If I'd told him anything else, he would think I was scared of him," Malone answered. "I left my security box in your safe when I went East. Could I have it now, please?"

The clerk hastened to open the big hotel safe and to place the brown metal box in Malone's hands.

He took it to his room before venturing to open it.

The box was filled with stock certificates and with certificates of ownership of varying numbers of feet in different mines. Some of the certificates he had won, others he had bought, still others had been given to him. In this country and at this time it was considered a nice gesture to give a friend a few shares of stock in a mine.

Usually the stock was worthless and consisted of nothing more than development rights. But if the mine by some miracle should be developed and turn into a bonanza, your friend would certainly remember you and appreciate the favor you had done him.

MALONE, like everyone else in Gleeper, speculated to a greater or less degree in mining stocks.

Mostly they were wildcat ventures that were not worth the paper they were written on.

The Yellow Jacket certificate was in the box. Malone took it out. He had accepted it in full payment of a hundred-dollar debt, from a man by the name of Sam Riley and it had been his opinion, and Riley's opinion, at the time of the deal, that the stock was utterly worthless. Harris, however, seemed to have another idea of its value.

He wondered why.

The Yelloy Jacket, located about four miles out of Gleeper, had been hailed as a bonanza as it was being developed, largely because it was located on property adjoining the phenomenonally rich Silver Queen Mine. A shaft four hundred feet deep had been sunk in an effort to hit the Silver Queen lode—without success. The Yellow Jacket had then been abandoned, as another worthless hole in the ground in a country where holes in the ground were all too plentiful.

Was it worthless now?

CHAPTER III

A Millionaire Or Not?

MALONE remained in his hotel all afternon. Putting the stock in his pocket, he went, late in the day, out to the home of Clem Hawkins, superintendent of the Silver Queen Mine. Hawkins was a big man, slow moving but alert, and honest as the day was long. He listened to Malone's story, then chuckled.

"So you're the man who owns control of the Yellow Jacket?" His eyes measured Malone, weighing him, estimating him. "We've been tryin' to locate the owner."

"Then the stock is valuable?"

"Mebbe," Hawkins said, slowly. "I'll tell yuh the truth, Malone, but it must be between the two of us. The silver lode we're workin' in the Silver Queen has taken a dip toward Yellow Jacket property. At the same time, it has begun to pinch out. We don't know whether it is goin' to play out entirely, or continue as a rich vein at a lower level. If the vein continues on to Yellow Jacket property at a deep level, yuh're worth a fortune. If it pinches out, the Yellow Jacket is worth exactly what it has always been worth—nothin'."

"When will you know?"

"Tomorrow," Hawkins answered. "I've got a double night shift workin' on the vein right now. By mornin' we'll know whether yuh're a millionaire or not. Would yuh like to sell that stock tonight, Malone?"

Malone moistened his lips, but did not answer.

"Mr. Cartwright, who as yuh know owns the majority interest in the Silver Queen, is in town," Hawkins went on. "I'm shore he'll make yuh an attractive offer for that stock."

"How attractive?"

Hawkins hesitated, studying the man facing him. "He authorized me to pay fifty thousand dollars to the owner of the Yellow Jacket, if I find him," he said bluntly.

"A moment ago, you mentioned a million."

Hawkins shook his head slowly but decisively. "A million or nothin', tomorrow. Fifty thousand tonight. Will yuh take it, Malone? I can't go no higher."

Somewhere inside of him Bud Malone was aware of a feeling of sweat. He could take the fifty thousand dollars. With that stake, he could go into the mining business, in a modest way. He had excellent contacts among the capitalists who visited the mining country, including Cartwright, the owner of the Silver Queen.

They knew him as a square shooter. They would go along with him. Within a few years he could become what the people of Hilton thought he was—an important Western mining man. It was what he had always wanted to be.

On the other hand. . . He shook his head.

Hawkins nodded as though he understood. "I'd wait until tomorrow too, Malone if I was in yore shoes. Mr. Cartwright is at the Palace Hotel, in case yuh change yore mind."

"When will you know whether or not the Yellow Jacket is worth a million or is just a hole in the ground?"

"When the night shift comes out, just after daylight tomorrow mornin'."

"I'll be there."

"So would I, if I was you."

In the growing dusk of night, Bud Malone walked away from the superintendent's house with a tight band of pressure around his heart. It was something new to him, this feeling of pressure, something he had never felt before. It worried him. All his life he had been a gambler and his pulse beat had never jumped a notch. Now—

Was it the size of the stakes? He might be a millionaire tomorrow. That was important, but he had played in many a game where the stakes were high and had taken his gains and his losses with no feeling of pressure.

He walked slowly down the street, engrossed in his thoughts, thinking of what wealth would mean to him, thinking also of Lucy Brown.

He couldn't force her image out of his mind.

He heard the step sound behind him in the darkness—a quick springy, warning stride, and he tried to turn.

The blackjack hit him on the back of the head.

He went down like a sack of sand, a

dead weight sprawling on the wooden sidewalk. . . .

MALONE awakened slowly, with an almost unendurable pain in the back of his skull. His head throbbed with a ragged drum beat. He lay still and tried to remember what had happened. He had been talking to Hawkins about the Yellow Jacket mine and he had been on his way back to his hotel when something had happened to him. What?

He tried to think, but the effort brought torture to his mind. Somewhere near him were voices. He tried to listen to the voices to keep from thinking about the agony in his mind. There were two of them. One snarled like a coyote, the other rumbled like a bear.

"He'd been out talkin' to Hawkins!" the snarling voice said, in a tone that indicated that talking to the Silver Queen superintendent was criminal.

"Shore of that?" the bass voice rumbled.

"Yes, I'm shore of it. I follered him."

There was silence for a while. Malone could sense the perturbed thinking of the men.

"That's bad," the bear voice rumbled again, "Cuss it!" There was anger in the voice, the kind of anger and irritation that shows in a man's voice when some plan goes wrong. "If he went to talk to Hawkins, that means he's got wind of the Yellow Jacket."

"That's the way I figgered it. I also figgered he wouldn't be willin' to trade us that stock."

"Is that why yuh slugged him and brought him in here?"

"Blame right it is. I ain't goin' to let no fortune slip through my fingers like that."

"Um. What do yuh figger to do, now that he knows the value of the stock?"

"I figger to tell him it's a trade anyhow," the coyote voice snarled. "Or else he won't be walkin' around no more."

"Think he'll agree?"

"When I get through with him, he'll agree to anything I say!"

Malone knew these voices. The men speaking were Harris and Jenkins.

Harris took time to think. Malone could feel him thinking.

"Then what?" Harris finally rumbled. "He'll have the sheriff on us."

"It would be his word against ours."

"That's right, it would. We could claim he made a fair trade. Anyhow I don't mind the sheriff and the law. But there's one think I do mind."

"What's that?"

"Malone. I mind him like the devil. He'd be on us himself. I'd a sight ruther it was the sheriff than Malone. This feller will kill yuh. Ever think of that?"

While they thought about this, Malone opened his eyes a slit. He was lying on the floor in what he thought was one of the back rooms of the Alhambra. A flickering wall lamp was throwing weird shadows across the ceiling.

Jenkins was sitting at a table, his feet resting on a chair. Harris was sitting beside the table. Neither was paying any attention to him, which confirmed what he was still too dazed to more than suspect —that he was tied hand and foot.

"I got an answer to that," Jenkins said at last. "We'll get the stock. Then—" He drew a dirty thumb across his throat.

"Um," Harris said. "What'll yuh do with the body?"

"Down a mine," Jenkins answered promptly. "There's plenty of holes in the ground around here. Nobody ever looks down 'em. Nobody would ever find him. He wouldn't be the first," he added, clinching his argument.

"People would ask questions," Harris said thoughtfully.

"Let 'em ask!" Jenkins said. "I got the answer." He tapped the front of his coat where the bulge showed.

"Well," Harris said. "Before we do anything, we've got to have that stock."

"He'll tell us where it is and he'll give it to us," Jenkins said. "I'll wake him up and ask him."

Malone hastily closed his eyes. A bucket of water splashed in his face. In spite of himself, he turned his head.

"He's awake," Jenkins said, satisfaction in his voice.

Malone felt himself lifted to a sitting position and propped against the wall.

"We want yore Yellow Jacket stock, in a trade for yore bum check," Jenkins said. The toe of his boot crunched into Malone's ribs.

IF THE stock ever left his possession Malone knew what would happen. He gritted his teeth against the pain. The

stock was not only worth a fortune to him, it was also worth his life.

"I told you to tell your boss to go to blazes," Malone said. "Now I'm telling you—"

Crunch! The toe landed again.

"Hold it," Harris said. "I know this breed. Yuh can beat him to death right here and not get anything out of him."

"He'll talk," Jenkins promised. "I know some tricks the Injuns used." He drew back his boot again.

"I said to stop it," Harris said, his voice booming with a commanding note.

Jenkins, irritated, flung himself into a chair and began to roll a cigarette.

"Yuh understand I want my money," Harris said to Malone. His voice was cordial now. It oozed confidence and good fellowship and good cheer. He was the hail-fellow-well-met now.

"You'll get your money," Malone said.

"That's true," Harris said. "One way or another, I'll get it. But I urge yuh"—his eyes glinted with dull lights like the sun reflected from a chunk of galena ore—"to do what I want. Or else yuh might be plumb sorry."

Malone grunted and shook his head. For fifteen minutes Harris argued with him, alternately blowing hot and cold, urging that he be sensible and give up the stock in exchange for his worthless check, pleading that this was only fair and honest, then threatening him with torture. Malone said nothing. They wouldn't kill him as long as he had the stock. Harm him, beat him, yes, but he would just have to take it. Behind his back, he worked with the ropes around his wrists.

Harris mopped sweat from his face and gave up. He nodded at Jenkins, who got quickly to his feet, a look of anticipation on his warped face. Malone braced himself against what he knew was coming.

"One second," Harris said. "I just thought of somethin'. Have yuh searched him? There's just a chance—"

"I took his gun."

On the floor, Malone took one last desperate heave at the ropes around his wrists. They didn't give.

Two minutes later the contents of his pockets were spread out on the table. Harris, a satisfied chuckle gurgling in his throat, was examing the stock certificate of the Yellow Jacket mine.

In this country, at this time, possession of a stock certificate was considered sufficent proof of ownership. The red tape of legal assignment, notarization of signatures, would come later.

Bending over Malone, Harris tucked a check in the gambler's pocket.

"Our business is finished," he said. "Yuh've paid yore debt and I am satisfied."

"All right," Malone answered. "Untie me and let me go."

"I said *our* business was finished," Harris spoke. "Jenkins here may have some business with yuh that ain't finished."

"I don't have any business with him," Malone protested.

"He has some business with you, mebbe," Harris said. He looked at Jenkins. "I reckon yuh better take him away from here for yore—'er talk."

"Shore," Jenkins said, grinning. "I'll go to the livery stable and hire a light wagon. We'll roll him in a tarp and carry him out and dump him in the wagon."

"I'll wait here till yuh get the wagon," Harris said.

Jenkins unlocked the door and went out, using the side entrance. Harris locked the door behind him.

"This is cold-blooded killing," Malone said. "They'll hang you as sure as shooting."

Harris shrugged. "Me, I haven't nothing to do with it. So far as I know, Jenkins is just goin' to talk to yuh."

"You're a liar."

Harris looked pained. He took a cigar out of his vest pocket and bit off the end. He spat on the floor.

"If any hangin' is done, I reckon it will be Jenkins," he said. "Which wouldn't be much loss, from my viewpoint. However, I'm keepin' out of this except, of course, for the recovery of my money."

On the floor, Malone was silent. He recognized the futility of argument. Behind his back, he kept working with the ropes around his wrists. In order to keep Harris from noticing what he was doing, he went on talking.

"Jenkins is a good hand with a rope," Harris said. "It ain't likely yuh can get out of any knot he tied."

Malone, with a hopeless feeling, recognized the truth in this. Horses *clip-clopped*

on the street outside and a rasping voice called, "Whoa!" Then came the sound of a wagon being driven into an alley. A knock sounded on the door.

"Open up!" Jenkins said.

HARRIS unlocked the door and Jenkins shoved his way through. He was carrying a huge armful of dirty canvas.

"Too bad I couldn't get no clean tarp," he said.

Behind him, her hair in curlers, her feet in slippers, a heavy robe pulled over her nightdress, came a girl carrying a double-barreled shotgun.

"Don't move!" Lucy Brown said, over the muzzle of the gun. "Don't move or I'll blow you in two."

To Bud Malone she was the most beautiful sight on earth. Again, looking at her, he had the impression he had known her somewhere before, but he couldn't remember where.

If they ever saw her again, it was a cinch that Harris and Jenkins would remember where they had seen her the first time. They jumped as if they had been touched by red-hot branding irons and jerked their heads over their shoulders to see who had entered.

Jenkins dropped the canvas and his hand moved toward the butt of the gun under his coat. He saw the muzzle of the shotgun covering him and his hand instantly stopped moving.

"Untie him!" The muzzle of the shotgun indicated Malone.

"Wait a min—" Harris began.

The gesture became an imperial order, backed up by the twin muzzles of the gun. *"Untie him!"*

Jenkins snarled an answer and it was Harris who moved to obey.

"Watch their guns!" Malone told her.

"I'm watching them. You, Crooked Face, get those hands up! Bud Malone, are you all right?"

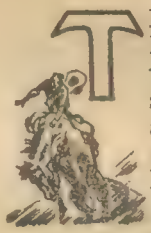
Harris fumbled with the knots, trying to take his time, trying to stall.

"Get him untied right now!" Lucy Brown said. Malone felt his hands come free. Rolling over he sat up and began to loosen the rope around his ankles. Out of the corners of his eyes, he saw Jenkins' hands start down.

"Watch him!" he yelled.

CHAPTER IV

More Than Money



THE muzzle of the shotgun in Lucky Brown's hand swung to cover the killer. Malone saw Jenkins stare at the gun and keep on staring, like a rattler about to strike. Following the line of the killer's gaze to the shotgun, he saw something that sent his heart up into his mouth.

Mud daubers had built nests in both barrels of the shotgun! Either this had happened, or some previous user of the gun had dropped it in the mud, plugging both barrels, and neglected to clean it.

In this condition, the gun was not only useless as a weapon, it was a death trap to the person who fired it. It would explode in the face of its user.

Jenkins had seen the condition of the gun. His hands were coming down.

"Don't fire that gun!" Malone shouted to Lucy. He jerked the last strand of rope from around his ankles.

Jenkins, cursing, grabbed at the barrel of the shotgun. Lucy tried to pull it away from him. He held it in one hand, reached for his pistol with the other.

"Don't pull that trigger!" Malone shouted at the top of his voice.

He went across the room in a headlong dive. Jenkins, snarling, shoved the muzzle of the shotgun away from him and jerked out his pistol to face this new antagonist.

"Watch Harris!" Malone yelled.

His arms went around the killer's body, pinning Jenkins' arms against him. He lifted Jenkins from the floor. Feet flailing in the air, Jenkins wiggled like a rat. Malone lifted the man from the floor, dropped him, fell with him. Jenkins grunted heavily, his pistol clattered on the floor. His fingers dug at Malone's eyes.

Somewhere behind him, Malone was aware of a thud and a grunt.

"Watch Harris!" he shouted again, then had no time for further shouting.

Jenkins was a wildcat, a writhing, twisting, swearing beast reaching clawed fingers for his eyes and for his throat. Malone struck out. His fist landed on Jenkins' chin. Jenkins grunted and lifted

his hands to try to protect his face. Malone rolled from him, grabbed the gun the killer had dropped, rose to one knee.

Harris was worrying him. Harris, in his own devious way, was even more deadly than Jenkins. He looked for Harris, swinging the pistol for a target.

Harris, blood oozing from a cut on his forehead, was trying to get to his feet. Malone wondered what had hit the man. As Harris tried to reach under his coat for a gun, Malone saw what had hit him. Lucy Brown brought the shotgun down again, across the man's head. Harris grunted and slid to the floor, out. She lifted the gun and saw she did not have to strike again.

Jenkins wiggled and tried to sit up.

"Lay still," Malone said.

Jenkins saw his own gun covering him. He lay still. Malone looked at the girl.

"I'm sure glad you didn't try to shoot that shotgun," he said, relief in his voice.

She stared at him. "I couldn't have shot it anyhow. It wasn't loaded."

"Wasn't—" He choked.

"Somebody had left it upstairs," she explained. "I found it in a closet and kept it, thinking the owner would come for it. When I heard them talking to you, it was the only weapon I could think of. I didn't even have any shells for it."

She had come into the back room of this saloon to rescue him with an empty gun! Malone let the wonder of this knowledge seep into his mind in little trickles of emotion. He got slowly to his feet. From Jenkins' coat pocket he took his own gun, from the pocket of Harris he took the Yellow Jacket certificate, replacing the stock with his own check.

"I'll pay that check off as soon as possible," he said. He looked at Jenkins. "If I was you, I'd make tracks. If I was you, I'd figure that seeing me again was about the same thing as committing suicide."

He didn't raise his voice but the tone in which he spoke brought a nervous tremor to Jenkins' face. The killer nodded.

"Git!" Malone said.

Jenkins went out the door, fast, as if he were glad to go.

"You sounded just like Miss Effie telling a bad boy to go home," Lucy Brown said.

"What?" Malone gasped. "Git" was Miss Effie's favorite word.

Lucy flushed, but her gaze did not falter. "I was in the Hilton orphanage too, Bud Malone. You were one of the big boys and you left six months after I came. I—I cried for weeks!"

"You were in that orphanage?"

She nodded. "How else would I have known who you were? When I grew up and left the orphanage, I came West too. Miss Effie gave me your address before I left."

MALONE gasped. Recognition came to him at last. He knew now where he had seen Lucy Brown before.

"Skinny Lucy!" he whispered. "You!"

She flushed. "I'm not skinny any more. I—I've grown up."

"Into a beautiful woman," Malone said. She flushed again. "Lucy!" Horror was suddenly in his voice. "When you came to the hotel, you knew I was a professional gambler. You—haven't let Miss Effie know that, have you?"

This was his most closely guarded secret.

"No," she said, and he sighed with relief. "I didn't need to tell her. She told me."

His voice sank to a whisper. "What?"

"She and everybody in Hilton knows what you are. You can't keep a secret like that. But they don't care, Bud. Miss Effie says you are the finest boy she ever had in the orphanage. She says you are a fine man. She says if you are a gambler, well, everybody on earth is a gambler in one way or another—the farmer with his crops, the merchant with his goods, the doctor with the lives of his patients. She says she is a gambler, too, that her boys and girls will grow up to be fine men and women."

"She said that?" Malone whispered.

She nodded. He swallowed. Somewhere inside of him he was aware of a feeling of tremendous relief. No longer would he have to sail under false colors. They knew him in his home town for what he was, had always known him, and they liked and respected him just the same.

"It's you they like, Bud," she said.

Inside of him the feeling grew. "Would —you come out with me to the Silver Queen in the morning—and find out whether the things we gambled for here" —he nodded around the room—"were worth anything?"

Her eyes told him that she would. . . .

Inside the superintendent's shack of the Silver Queen Mine the next morning were three men and a girl. Hawkins, the superintendent, Cartwright, the well-dressed, calm owner of the Silver Queen, and Bud Malone and Lucy Brown, once of Miss Effie's orphanage. The lights of dawn were beginning to creep into the little office. Outside on the brush-covered mountain slope birds were awaking.

"The shift will be up in less than thirty minutes," Hawkins said. "We'll know by then if the vein plays out or goes over on to Yellow Jacket property." His gaze shifted to Cartwright. "I offered Mr. Malone, for yore account, fifty thousand cash for his Yellow Jacket holdin's last night."

Cartwright nodded. He had clear eyes and he met the world in a straight-forward gaze, the kind of gaze Malone knew and liked. He had met men like this financier in poker games over much of the Western country. Good players. He was aware that Cartwright's eyes were on him, measuring him, sizing him up.

"I understand you are a professional gambler, Mr. Malone."

"That's right."

"You prefer to turn down fifty thousand dollars on the chance of making a fortune? Remember, your Yellow Jacket holdings may be worthless."

"I'll take the gamble," Malone said.

"Um," Cartwright mused. "A hundred thousand, sir!"

"The same answer," Malone said.

Beside him, he was aware the Lucy Brown had almost stopped breathing. He wondered what she was thinking. In her eyes, he was turning down a fortune.

"That was an offer," Cartwright said. "Did you understand me, sir?"

"I understood you, sir."

Cartwright smiled and shook his head. "I don't feel I can go any higher. But I warn you—"the smile died—"that if you are trying to take advantage of the fact that the Silver Queen vein strays on to Yellow Jacket property, to hold me up, you'll find me a hard man to handle."

There was warning in his voice, the warning of a man who knows his strength.

"I have no intention of holding you up, sir. I don't like to buy a pig in a poke, and I don't want to sell one."

"I am willing to take the risk."

"Sorry." Malone shook his head. "But I'll make you a counter offer and I'll make it in writing, and we'll put it in a sealed envelope. Then, when we get the report from underground, you can open it and judge for yourself if my terms are fair."

IGNORING Cartwright's frown, he went to the table, picked up paper and pen, wrote rapidly. The two men watched him, Cartwright musingly, Hawkins doubtfully. Lucy Brown watched him as if afraid to take a deep breath. He sighed his name with a flourish and sealed the page in an envelope which he handed to the financier.

"Open it after we get the news," he said.

Tension grew in the little office as they waited. "We might as well go out to the shaft," Hawkins said.

They went out one by one, Lucy first.

The dawn light was brighter now. Down under the ground miners were moving through tunnels toward the lift that would carry them to the surface. Cage whistles shrilled overhead. Two cable-carrying wheels began to turn.

"They're comin' up," Hawkins said.

Lucy clutched Malone's arm.

"I can't get over you being the girl I knew as Skinny Lucy," Malone said.

"Bud! Don't you realize what's happening. In another few minutes you'll either be a millionaire or you'll be—"

"Broke," he finished for her. "Tell me, Lucy. Will it make any difference to you which it is?"

"You know it won't, Bud. It would be nice to be rich, but I know you can stand being poor."

"Then you know the way I feel," he said. "The way I've always felt, the feeling that has made me a gambler, the thing that has won me more money than I could spend. All men I have met have been trying awfully hard to keep from being poor. Because they were trying too hard, they overplayed their hands. Winning meant too much to them, so they lost. Winning never meant much to me because I was never afraid to be poor. That's why I've won, all my life, because I never minded losing, that's why they call me Lucky Bud Malone."

"By the lord Harry!" Cartwright,

listening, spoke. "I believe you mean that!"

"I do mean it."

"Cage comin' up," Hawkins said.

Malone heard the whistles of the engines in the morning sky, he saw the spinning wheels, the lifting cables. Then the cage came to a halt level with the ground, and the miners, their carbide lights dim in the light of growing day, were coming off the platform. The foreman, spotting Hawkins, went straight to the superintendent. They talked for a moment apart.

"Aren't you even curious to know what they're saying?" Lucy whispered.

"They'll tell me," Bud answered.

The two men came over to them. The foreman shook his head and made his report. "The vein petered out completely," he said.

Hawkins looked at Malone, sympathy in his eyes. "Sorry," he said. "The Silver Queen is dead, from now on, and so is the Yellow Jacket."

There was no question that he was lying. The truth was in his voice.

"Sorry," Cartwright said. "You saved me a hundred thousand dollars."

"Don't mention it," Malone answered. He turned away, aware that Lucy Brown was on his arm.

"Then we're broke," she whispered.

He smiled. "As long as we think in terms of *we*, we're never broke."

They walked along the slope, toward the buggy in the mine yard, walking close to each other, their steps in rhythm. Far above them, on the peaks of the mountains, the sunrise changed from a dull gray to a beautiful rose pearl.

"Malone," Cartwright's voice came after them, "that offer you made me?"

"Oh, yes. Tear it up. It is of no value now."

"But," the voice of the mine owner came again, "I've just read the thing. It says that you propose an equal partnership between three men—me, you, and a man by the name of Sam Riley—for the development of the Yellow Jacket property."

"That's right," Malone answered. "Riley is the man I got the stock from. Actually, won it, in a poker game."

"You—" The financier's voice had a curious crack in it. "You won it?"

"Right."

"And you still feel the man you won it from has a claim on you?"

"Of course. Sure, I had a valid claim to the stock. But Riley thought it was worthless, and so did I. If it turned out to be valuable, I thought it only fair to cut him in on it."

"I'll be hanged!" Cartwright exploded. "Begging your pardon, Miss Brown. Do you mean to say, Malone, that you're the kind of a man—why, you turned down a hundred thousand dollars and gave me a third interest for nothing!"

"Since we would have used your Silver Queen to develop the Yellow Jacket, I felt you had an interest coming," Malone said.

CARTWRIGHT shot out an explosion. His voice sounded dazed.

"Malone"—his voice grew stronger as if he had made up his mind—"I'm looking for a man to be my Western representative, to handle my interests during my absence. The salary would start at ten thousand a year. Malone—"

"I'm listening."

"Would you like to be that man? Anybody who has done what you have done is the kind of man I want to have on my side. Malone—"

"Five thousand," Malone said.

"What? I said ten."

"Five—and a partnership in the development of new properties," Malone answered. "I would say no salary but I need a regular income to support my wife. So I say five thousand and a partnership, so I can take my risks with you and my profits with you too."

"Done!" Cartwright shouted. "We'll draw up the agreement as soon as I can get in touch with my lawyers."

"All right," Malone said.

"Wife," Lucy Brown said. Her voice was suddenly lifeless, a dead sound in the morning air. "I didn't know—"

"You are that wife, Lucy," he said gently. "If you're willing to be. How would you like to go back to Hilton and tell the folks there that we are in the mining business?"

"I would be proud to tell them I was in any business, with you," she answered.

The white light of dawn lifted over the peaks, brightening the mountains. Arm in arm, they walked to the buggy, bright in the light of the new day.

FORTUNE for the

or, there's gold in them thar buttes

FIND a certain pair of twin black buttes connected by a low saddle, and rising perhaps twelve hundred feet above the desert floor in southern California, and a fortune in gleaming gold may lie within your grasp.

There is a third butte off to one side of the other two. The three may be almost anywhere below the Riverside County line and over toward the eastern base of the towering coastal range. The gold itself lies in a narrow canyon slashing down from one of the twin buttes. The canyon floor, as "Peg-Leg" Smith afterwards recalled it, is peppered with the golden stones, many of them partly coated black.

"Enough gold," Peg-Leg said, "to fill a hundred wagons without half tryin'."

Smith was lost and, half-crazy with thirst, was searching for water when he stumbled onto the golden treasure. But he was sane enough to recognize gold when he saw it, and to pocket several handfuls of the precious nuggets before

The Story of the Lost Peg-Leg Mine— First in a New Series!

The grave-digging job was completed under a shower of falling arrows

FINDING

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

Thomas ("Peg-Leg") Smith

he staggered on across the desert waste. Ultimately he reached Los Angeles.

There he showed his nuggets and went on a spree that was memorable even for a mountain man. He spent most of his nuggets, but, for years he carried a few of them to show to the skeptical who could not deny the evidence of their own eyes

Found—and Lost!

Yet neither he nor anyone else has ever been able to relocate those twin black buttes and the gold-filled canyon at their feet. Whoever solves this, perhaps the greatest of all lost mine mysteries, will have a new address. Easy Street for the rest of his life.

Hundreds have tried to find the lost bonanza. Peg-Leg himself tried, so did many who had heard his story, as well as mining engineers and just plain adventurers to whom the lure of the desert and a fortune in gold was a lodestone.

Though it is a long time now since Smith first pocketed his nuggets the search for his mine has never been completely given up. Still, the mystery may be solved some day. The desert is a big place. But it doesn't change much. Mountains don't get up and move away. They remain much as they did a hundred, a thousand, or even a hundred thousand years ago. Only the sand shifts in the emptiness, and the giant cactus trees grow slowly older.

Modern highways now stretch across the arid miles to join the teeming West Coast cities of southern California with

John A. Thompson

Man's Quest for Hidden Treasure

EVER SINCE the world was just a button the search for golden treasure and lost mines has lured the venturesome. Our early West, bonanza rich in mineral wealth, has produced its share of lost mine stories, stories which will be told in the new series of articles.

In time these legends will become an authentic part of our Western folklore, like the age-old tale of Jason and the Golden Fleece.

Naturally details vary. Different versions have cropped up with re-telling and the passing of the years. But the stories are all founded on historic fact, on a life-size skeleton of solid truth. And hunting such hidden treasures affords an exciting twist to the perennial quest for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The gold *is* there. The problem is properly to locate the rainbow.—*J.A.T.*

the rest of the country. But they are few and far between, as are the railroads, both of which have taken the place of stage-coach routes and Indian paths across the desert.

Irrigation has made farming profitable in some sections, such as parts of the Imperial Valley. Even so they are just a fringe of green against the backdrop of thousands of square miles of desert sand. Mines reached by rutted wagon roads, and the winding trails of prospectors and their burros have opened up some of the arid desert hills to a shifting scatterment of settlers.

The Same, Yesterday and Today

In the main, however, the vast desert is as it has always been, and as it was when Peg-Leg Smith first started out to cross it—a huge, sun-blistered waste, stony silent, weird and eerie in its forbidding vastness. Country like that can hold a secret enfolded in its arid heart a long, long time.

It has held the secret of the Lost Peg-Leg Mine for better than a hundred years. A hundred years! A mere breath of time as the eternal desert reckons it.

There was no fake about Peg-Leg Smith. His find was not legend. Historians as well as those who have sought every clue possible to his fabulously rich lost mine have checked on that. They have covered nearly every movement he ever made from the day he was born Thomas L. Smith in a little cabin north of Dicks River in Gerrard county, Kentucky, on October 10th, 1801, to the day he died destitute in a San Francisco hospital—October 15th, 1866.

Peg-Leg led a full, robust early frontier life. Even without his fateful discovery of a fortune in desert gold Smith was quite a character. And plenty salty.

Leaving home in his early 'teens he spent a few wild years on the Mississippi, then became one of that special class who first explored the West—a mountain man trapping the wilderness for beaver pelts, and alternately trading and fighting with the Indians. He journeyed into Utah and the Snake Indian country on these ventures, learned to take redskin scalps when the occasion warranted, and to hold his own in any rough-and-tumble brawl. Knives, bare fists or guns—it was all the same to him whenever other mountain men sought to whittle him down to size.

Brave, Dashing, and Truthful

The black-eyed, bushy-browed, solidly-built young Irishman was a hard man to whittle. Afraid of nothing that walked, crawled, rode or swam, he often made his headquarters in Santa Fe, the great rendezvous and holidaying place of mountain men in the early days. As hard a drinker when on a spree as he was a fighter, and at the same time a dashing hit with the sloe-eyed senoritas of Santa Fe, it was only natural that he got to know such famous contemporaries as Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, and Ewing Young.

None of the hardy souls who knew him, or who trapped with him and fought with him side by side when need be ever questioned Tom Smith's personal bravery, or called him a liar. Both these characteristics were important to him in the light of subsequent events connected with the discovery of his mine.

In 1827 Tom lost his leg, and was given the nickname that followed him to his grave. At the time of his accident he was trapping the upper Platte with another historic pioneer, St. Vrain, a man named Pratt, and three others. It has been recorded that Pratt was killed in an Indian ambush, and that Smith, who was just twenty-six then, insisted on going out in the open to give his former companion a decent burial.

"'Tis the least I can do," he is quoted as saying. "Keep me covered, St. Vrain, whilst I dig a shallow hole and lay some sod over the lad. He'd do the same for me."

St. Vrain was against it as too foolhardy. But Smith was not to be dissuaded.

"We all got to go some time," he said, and ran out to the fallen man.

The grave-digging job was completed under a shower of falling arrows. Oblivious to the rain of lethal shafts Smith bared his head and knelt at the makeshift grave.

"Now I lay me down to sleep . . ."

He muttered the beginning of the only prayer he knew. He paused, trying to think of the next line. Suddenly he heeled

to one side, reached for the gun on the ground beside him, and got up, firing and swearing at the same time.

"The blasted red sons!" he yelled, and he dragged himself back to the protective shelter of a grove of trees where St. Vrain and the other trappers were hidden.

One leg dragged. An arrow had shattered the bone of his left leg below the knee.

In camp, Smith himself operated on the leg with a butcher knife, severing the flesh and muscles of his torn leg. With a tin cup full of whisky to steady him, he had one of his companions saw the bone above the break with the camp meat saw, then slosh more whisky on the raw wound and bind the stump.

St. Vrain and the other hunters thought Smith would bleed to death as he lay there half-unconscious. It looked as if another grave would have to be dug for young Tom when night came and the marauding Indians had been beaten off. By daybreak, however, when the Indians had given up the battle, the bleeding had stopped. Smith was carried on a litter slung between two horses to a friendly Indian village a hundred miles away, and left there to recover under the care of kindly Indian women. He did get well, and while he was convalescing he spent his time fashioning a wooden leg.

In later years Peg-Leg many times declared that the heavy wood prop served him better than a flesh and blood leg.

"It's fixed, ye see," he explained, "so's I can unstrap it in a jiffy. And it makes a fine shillelagh to break a bazoo's head wid in a barroom brawl."

Plenty of times he did use that swinging cudgel in California. Local police blotters of the day testify to that.

Who Wants Copper?

Early in 1829, two years after his accident, Smith was trapping with a party of mountain men down the Colorado River where the Virgin River flows into it from the north in what is now the southeast corner of Nevada. One of the party, "Dutch George," came into camp one afternoon with what he thought was gold.

Ewing Young, who also was a member of the party, handed the specimens over to Peg-Leg for appraisal. Peg-Leg laughed.

"The dumb fool," he retorted. "If Dutch had been down to the Santa Rita copper mines in Nuevo Mex like I have he'd a knowed the stuff was copper, not gold."

Young suggested a search for the place where the find had been made. But Dutch George failed to relocate the deposit, though he insisted it was in the bottom of a dry creek two miles from where the Virgin runs into the Colorado. The party resumed their main business—beaver trapping.

Their lack of interest was natural in that day. For most early-day mountain men believed the real wealth of the West was in furs, not in gold or copper, or any other mineral. Few of them were prospectors by training or inclination. And it was still almost twenty years before Marshall was to make his historic discovery of gold in Sutter's millrace at Coloma, California, the find that started the great stampede of the 49'ers.

The Lure of New Places

However, it shows that Peg-Leg Smith had at least a smattering of knowledge of what raw gold and other ores looked like, and by other mountain men was considered an authority. So he was the least likely member of the trapping party to be fooled by a mineral discovery or misjudge its potential value.

Peg-Leg and a man named Maurice Le Duke were chosen by Young to take the heavy load of furs to market. Peg-Leg had never been to the Pacific coast before, a fact which prompted him to essay the long and at that time trackless trip across the southern California desert to one of the Spanish settlements on the coast. There, he reasoned, he could sell the furs to Yankee merchants and at the same time pick up a cavvy of fine horses from the outlying *rancheros*. They could be traded to the Indians or brought back to Santa Fe where they would fetch a handsome price. It was a business trip, and feasible.

Another Smith, the famed Jedediah, had made the long and hazardous trek a few years earlier, but had taken a more northern route. Peg-Leg figured that if he and Maurice worked down the Colorado, perhaps to its confluence with the Gila—

Yuma was just an Indian village then—and took plenty of water with them they could follow a general northwesterly direction and eventually pull into the coastal pueblo of Los Angeles.

The Indians whom Peg-Leg queried said it could be done. The distance was roughly two hundred and fifty miles as the crow flies.

Into Burning Sands

Unfortunately Peg-Leg underestimated the rigors of negotiating the long miles of burning desert sands. Progress for the two-man outfit with its train of fur-laden horses was slower than anticipated.

A few days west of the Colorado, Smith realized he had taken on a real chore. He also knew that he would never get through with all his furs, for they had struck no springs, and water for the animals was running short. He jettisoned half his cargo of skins, burying the beaver pelts in a sand dune and carefully marking the spot. The furs are probably there yet.

Smith and his companion had covered no more than half the distance to their destination and now, with weird ranges of low-lying desert hills in sight and the towering peaks of the high coastal mountains shimmering hazily into an ever-receding background, Peg-Leg wished he had never started. Yet he kept doggedly on. Partly because it was not in his nature to admit defeat by man, beast or the elements, and partly in the hope of finding water somewhere in the mountains ahead. Besides, it would be hopeless to attempt the waterless trek back to the Colorado.

With the scant supply remaining in their last water keg they would never make it.

A day or so later, days of slow, grueling progress, the pair reached one of the desert ranges. Telling Maurice to rest in the shade of some sprawling greasewood bushes, Peg-Leg pointed to a pair of twin black buttes connected by a low saddle with a third similar butte that was off to one side.

"Looks like there might be vegetation on them hills," Peg-Leg said. "I'm goin' to try for water in the canyon between the two black buttes."

There was no water in the canyon. Nothing but black rock. The whole formation seemed to be some gigantic ages-past blowout of volcanic origin. Smith decided to scale one of the buttes to get a better view of the surrounding country, and see if he could spot a patch of green growth that would be evidence of water or a hidden spring.

It was a laborious climb, but finally he made it. He sat down to rest, but it was uncomfortable. Too many stones. The same black rocks that had filled the canyon.

Smith got up again and spotted a narrow, gorgelike cut that headed right up to the crest of the butte.

There was shade inside its close walls, and it offered an easier route down from the butte.

Smith saw no signs of water in the canyon or in the parched country spread out beneath. In the distance westward he did see a tall, outstanding peak in the high range of mountains that always had seemed to be eluding them. It didn't appear to be so far away now. The blazing desert sun glinted bright yellow on its towering spire.

This looked like a good omen. Surely there would be water in the high range.

But when Smith reached the narrow canyon, it also was filled with black rocks, and its floor was covered with smaller black-looking pebbles. Smith studied them, idly at first. Then his sharp eyes noticed a queer yellow shine on some of the stones.

He picked up a few.

"More of Dutch George's danged copper," he muttered, starting to throw the stones away.

Solid Gold!

But as he turned the pebbles in his hand something clicked in Peg-Leg's mind, some almost forgotten bit of prospector's lore he had picked up in his wanderings in New Mexico and Arizona. The yellow gleam didn't flicker and shift, bright one moment, dark the next, as he turned the stone in his hand.

"Copper!" he snorted. "By glory, this stuff is gold—solid gold!"

Another fact struck him. The stones

were heavy to the feel, heavier than bullet lead. Quickly he scratched one of them with his pocket knife. The stone was soft, and the knife blade drew a streak of gleaming yellow across the stone. He tried others with the same result.

He made another and final test. Gold, he knew, was malleable. Placing one of the pebbles on a large boulder, he hammered it with a heavy rock. It didn't break or crumble the way most minerals do, including Fool's Gold. It merely flattened out into a rough, thin button.

Convinced that what he had found was the real McCoy, Smith crammed his pockets with the precious nuggets, hurried down the canyon and back to where he had left Maurice.

Whether or not Peg-Leg told Maurice Le Duke about his find, history does not record. But mountain men generally were notoriously reticent about what they considered strictly their own business. Or Smith may not as yet have considered his discovery of much importance. What he and Maurice both had mostly on their minds was water.

Peg-Leg and his companion reached the foot of the shining mountain the next day. The hard going was rewarded when they found at its base the most precious treasure of all—a spring of crystal clear cool water. They camped at the spot for several days, then crossed the mountains, headed for Los Angeles. When they reached the coastal pueblo Maurice Le Duke seems to have dropped out of the picture entirely.

Couth or Uncouth

Smith sold the furs, and showed some of his pebbles to men qualified to identify them. They were gold nuggets, sure enough. Peg-Leg cashed some in, and went on that grand spree. As usual, he landed in the clink, this time for whamming a prominent Los Angeles citizen over the head with his wooden leg for insinuating that he was just an uncouth bum with no business on the city's streets.

"Couth or uncouth, ye spavined, spindle-legged excuse for a human bein'," yelped Smith, "this'll teach ye to keep a civil tongue in yer head towards yer betters."

And, having expressed his opinion verbally, he unstrapped his leg and expressed his thoughts in action—right on the coco. The local gendarmes showed up in bunches. They always did—they had to—when wild *Americanos* were on the loose.

When Peg-Leg had cooled off sufficiently to be let loose he was turned out of jail with a special message from the *alcalde*, the mayor. It was to the effect that the town would like it fine if *el cojo*, the lame one, would clear out and not come back. They also told him he was lucky the high-toned victim of his swinging peg had recovered. Or else he would now be being hung for a killing.

Smith grinned. Though he had liked Los Angeles, the West was big, with plenty of room in it. Besides there was that horse cavvy to get from the rancheros and take back to trade to the Indians.

Gold Can Wait!

It does not seem to have entered his mind, for some time, that a return to the twin buttes would be more to his advantage. Instead, the next heard of him he was back in Utah, trading California horses to the Indians for furs, and joining up with Bridger and others in another trapping trip. This time the trek was to the Green River country in Wyoming.

So ten years passed, and still no return to the gold-filled canyon in the California desert.

In 1829, Smith, after having been for a time back in his old headquarters at Santa Fe, was at Bent's Fort on the Arkansas, organizing a trapping expedition with Kit Carson and a Captain James Hobbs who later wrote a book about his experiences in the far West. The gold? It could still wait.

But its day was soon coming. Even in 1839, beaver was becoming scarce. To top it off a few years later silk hats replaced beaver as what the well-dressed man—in the East—should wear, and the bottom fell out of the market. The era of the trapping mountain man was drawing to a fast close.

Peg-Leg, too, was getting older. He thought it would be safe to try Los Angeles again, California anyhow, and maybe settle down. On the coast he found things had changed, too, especially in the

horse-dealing business. The Spanish *rancheros* felt they were losing too many horses due to a loose count on the part of some of the traders, or to stealing on the part of some of their Indian horse herders. So they had clamped down on the activities of all *Americano* adventurers.

Why Split a Treasure?

Peg-Leg settled down, living for a time in San Francisco, then Los Angeles. Following the Mexican War, California was awarded to the United States by Mexico under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, early in 1848. Gold was discovered at Coloma the same year. It proved to be one of the richest placer gold discoveries the world has ever known. The rush to California commenced, first a trickle, then a year later a full stampede of thousands of gold-seekers.

It is not believed that Peg-Leg joined the rush But in 1850 a small group of men came to Warner's Ranch—now known as Warner's—about forty miles north of Vallecito back of the coast mountains behind San Diego. It was once a stopping place for stage-coaches along the old hazardous Butterfield Trail from Yuma to southern California.

The men waited a day or so at the ranch, then were joined by Peg-Leg Smith.

They made no bones about saying that they were going into the desert to find a mine on which Smith had stumbled years earlier.

The group left in high spirits, with Peg-Leg leading the way. In less than two weeks the men were back—with no gold and without Peg-Leg. And they were mad. They said that Peg-Leg had taken them into a lot of dry hills, then shaken them. He didn't return to Los Angeles, but went on to Yuma.

One man in the abandoned party said he didn't believe Smith had a mine at all.

"Leastways he didn't act as if he did. Or else he couldn't find it."

The latter guess is probably the truth. Or it might have been that Smith, volatile and temperamental as he was, suddenly decided to lose the whole bunch and not split his rich treasure with anybody.

Eventually Smith returned to San Francisco. In 1854 he started out with another party having a full complement of twenty-one men, the necessary horses and pack animals for their supplies. The story was given quite a play in the local papers. This time Smith's destination was not the twin black buttes in southern California, but the locale of Dutch George's copper find along the Virgin River where it enters the Colorado.

This party also returned disgruntled, but Smith was with them. They had gone only as far as the west bank of the Colorado and had never reached their objective. No one knows what the men thought of the wild goose chase on which Peg-Leg had led them, but what Smith thought of them has been recorded in his own explosive words.

"Worse idjits than the men I took out of Warner's. Not one of 'em no better'n sheep follyin' a leader."

On mature reflection he may have thought the copper nuggets Dutch George had found might be gold after all, but he may have changed his mind and decided not to reveal his secrets to anybody. Or he may not have been able to find his mine.

One thing, however, can be banked on. In neither case did Peg-Leg journey into the desert just for the trip. Both times he must have had something definite on his mind when he started out.

On His Own

In 1855 a man returning from delivering a wagon train of California provisions to the Army post at Fort Yuma spotted a riderless horse in a canyon to the north of the Vallecito mountains a few miles above Vallecito on the Butterfield Trail. A weary, thirst-crazed, peg-legged man was clinging to the saddle, and dragging his feet rather than walking along with the horse.

His eyes were glazed, and he was only half-conscious.

The wagoner stopped his teams and went out into the desert. He carried the almost dead man back to the wagon, laid him in the wagon bed and forced a few drops of water between his parched blue lips. The man came to, but was too weak to talk. So the wagoner left him at Warner's ranch in care of the hands there.

All night the peg-legged man raved in delirium about twin black buttes and a canyon strewn with gold.

"It's no use," he kept muttering over and over. "All the gold in the world for the findin', but them twin buttes ain't where they ought to be. They—can't have walked away. They must be there."

In the morning the man was better. After a hearty breakfast he told the cowboys at the ranch that he was Tom Smith —Peg-Leg Smith—and told about making that trip across the desert with Maurice Le Duke, and of the twin buttes he had climbed in search of water. He told of finding a gold-strewn canyon, though it was water that he wanted most.

Naturally the cowboys were all for another try. They were desert-wise, they said. They would all help. Peg-Leg shook his head.

"The place is out there somewheres, fellers," he said, waving his hand in the direction of the desert. "But it's no use. I've tried and tried, and I've made my last search."

No More Searching

He had. For all the cowboys' pleading he refused to tackle the sand again and insisted on returning to San Francisco, where his spirits, his health and his fortunes gradually sank lower and lower.

Toward the end he took to begging drinks in San Francisco bars, a pitiful, tragic figure of a once mighty mountain man licked by the ghost wraiths of the desert and a once-found fortune in gold he could never find again.

That last trip into the desert seems to have been his undoing. He never fully recovered from the devastating effects it had on both his body and his mind. Less sturdy men would never have recovered at all, or got out of the desert alive.

Peg-Leg died in San Francisco in the county hospital in the early fall of 1866. That is on record. It is not legend, story or hearsay.

It is important to remember the date of his death, because as late as the 1870's a certain rollicking "Peg-Leg Smith" was caroming around the southern California desert country. And he was claiming he had found and lost a fabulously rich gold deposit in one of the desert mountain ranges between the Colorado river and the coastal mountains.

On several well-authenticated occasions he produced gold nuggets to prove it.

Peg-Leg Number Two

With this second Peg-Leg on the scene it is small wonder that considerable confusion, and a whale of a lot of argument has crept into many modern versions of the Lost Peg-Leg Mine, particularly regarding its probable whereabouts.

Peg-Leg Number Two who lived well into the memory of many old time southern Californians who were alive at least until a few years ago—maybe some are alive even today—was thoroughly familiar with the desert country. He acted as guide across it for several years, was for a while a teamster between Yuma and the southern California towns, and drove a stage-coach along the road that passes through Redlands and Riverside. He liked to act mysterious and to spin a good yarn whenever he had the chance.

Hard research and investigation of his comings and goings have produced something stronger than a shred of evidence that the second Peg-Leg Smith's mine was in reality much further east than the original. It may have been the gold deposit that later became known as the Mesquite placers in the Cargo Muchacho Mountains north of Ogilby.

These placer diggings, from which nuggets could be picked up at the grass roots when they were first worked, lie about six miles north of Ogilby and in the area east toward the Chocolate Range. They are not far from the old Yuma to San Bernardino wagon road which Peg-Leg Smith the Second traveled frequently as a wagon freighter and teamster between Yuma and the coast. He may even have stopped off occasionally at the deposit to replenish his supply of "samples."

Lady with Nuggets

Though the Mesquite diggings never proved bonanza rich they did afford wages or at times even better for Mexicans, prospectors and others who worked them with dry-washers in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Right up until the last war a few prospectors were still rework-

ing the Mesquite placer sand for beans and bacon. Even today a fellow might do about as well.

This would explain one occurrence frequently related in connection with the Lost Peg-Leg Mine. It is the story of an Indian woman who stumbled into Glamis about thirty years ago clutching a handful of gold nuggets wrapped in an old piece of dirty blanket. A gang of Southern Pacific railroad section hands were in Glamis at the time, working out of Ogilby.

When some of them rushed over to help the exhausted woman, she took a new lease on life, screamed and fled back to the desert, dropping her bit of blanket in the process. The home-made bag contained perhaps a thousand dollars worth of nuggets!

Imagination has led many to the conclusion that this gold was part of Peg-Leg's long-lost treasure trove. They declare it was found in the region in which Peg-Leg operated. And it was, if the second Peg-Leg Smith was meant, and they usually neglect to mention it was found in the general region of the well-worked Mesquite placers. It might have come from there, or from some secret canyon in either the Chocolate or Cargo Muchacho Mountains.

Only a Dream Now

The chances that the Indian woman's nuggets came from the original Peg-Leg Smith's lost mine, his twin butte gold bonanza, seem slim. Still it could be. Nothing is certain in the desert and Indians, particularly the old ones, have secrets they never tell.

One thing, however, is certain. The black buttes and their canyon with its golden fortune are as lost today as they ever were when even a mountain man like Thomas L. Smith, Peg-Leg Number One, could not find them again.

Hundreds have tried, and others will. But so far the baffling enigma has remained unsolved. Most of the searching has centered out of Warner's and Vallecito around the edges of the Vallecito and Superstition Mountains, back to where the hills drop off to the broad sink of the Salton Sea.

Nevertheless if anyone wants to join the adventurous band of those who have tackled the problem of Peg-Leg's mine here is a hint—for what it's worth. Don't look for Smith's mountain on modern maps of southern California. It isn't there. But researchers have pretty well established it's identity—Mount Palomar.

The famed Palomar Observatory on the mountain's top houses a giant telescope pointed toward the sky. Suppose instead of pointing skyward to pick out craters in the moon as easily as a man can spot the holes in Swiss cheese that huge magnifying machine could be swung down to sweep the tangled rows of desert hills below.

Could it pick out those precious, elusive twin black buttes that hold the key to Peg-Leg's mine? Peg-Leg could see the mountain from the buttes, with his naked eye.

The experiment with the big telescope will never be tried. But a fellow could try it himself with a pair of darn good field-glasses.

He could sit up there and look and look, and dream and dream. He might even see old Peg-Leg clambering down the narrow gold-filled canyon. The desert does strange things to a man's eyesight sometimes. Especially when he is looking for a fortune hidden in a long-lost mine.

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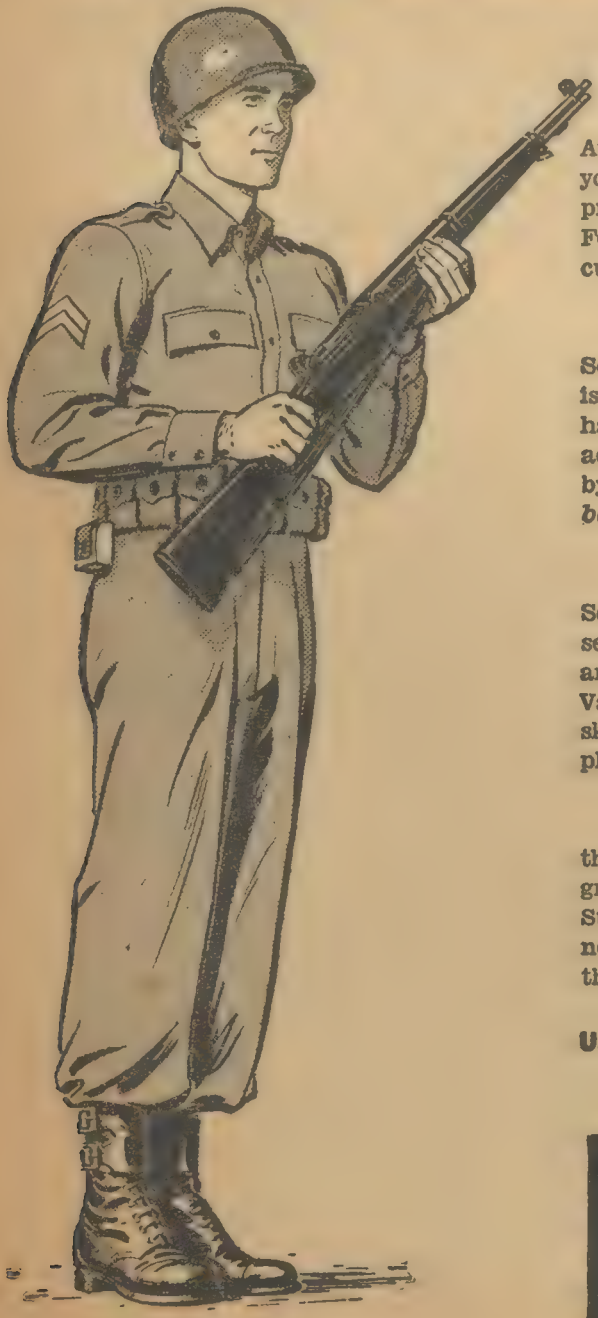
Coming Next Issue

TEXAS GOLD

Another True Story of a Lost Mine

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

"I'M PROUD TO BE IN THE COMBAT FORCES!"



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One Night at Sadie Hogan's

By RAY GAULDEN

A promise of six-gun death is a promise that must be kept!

The girl came close to Durk's table and pirouetted before him

DURK Pastor sat alone at a card table in Sadie Hogan's Big Corral and tried not to look at the batwings, tried not to let the crowd know that he was the least bit worried. But he couldn't help being a little worked up. There was sweat on his forehead and the palms of his hands, and he wished somebody would open a window. It was like an oven in this place.

He glanced down at the little piece of paper he had stuck in his shirt pocket. He didn't need to read it again to know what it said. An hour ago, old Limpy Smith, who owned the livery stable here in town, had come rushing into the barroom and handed Durk the piece of brown wrapping paper, which, Limpy said, someone had left pinned to the door of his little cubby-hole office while he was out to supper. The note was addressed to Durk Pastor and it said:

I guess you didn't know that John Banks had a kid. But he did. For a long time, I've been looking for you, Durk Pastor, and tonight I'll watch you die.

Tommy Banks.

Durk Pastor had read the note and laughed, even though he didn't really feel like it. He had said that if anybody was looking for him, he would be waiting. Of course, old Limpy Smith had read the note and he hadn't been able to keep his big mouth closed. Now everybody knew about it and they were all waiting to see what would happen.

Some of them had slapped Durk on the back and said if he needed help, they would be there to lend a hand. But he knew they didn't mean what they said. The people of this town hated him and would like nothing better than to see him out of the way. They just talked nice to him because they were afraid he would come out on top like he had always done.

Durk jumped a little when Sadie

Hogan, the mountainous woman who owned the Big Corral, came padding up behind him. Durk scowled.

"Oh, it's you," he said ungraciously.

Sadie's fleshy face wore a worried look. "You're not getting nervous, are you, Durk?" she asked. "You're not worried about this Tommy Banks gent?"

Durk laughed. "Me, worried? You ought to know better than that."

Sadie did not look too relieved. "I don't know what this Tommy Banks has got against you, Durk, and I don't care," she said. "You're my friend and if you say the word, I'll have a couple of my boys watch the door."

Durk Pastor's lips flattened and his eyes flashed at her. "I don't need any of yore help. Quit stickin' yore nose in my business."

"Sure, Durk. Don't get mad at me. I was only trying to help."

"All right, so you were only trying to help. Let's forget it."

A MAN at the bar called to the fat woman, and Durk was glad when she moved away. Confound it, she was always getting in his hair.

Durk poured himself another drink from the half-empty bottle on the table, then turned his eyes toward the bar. He saw Bart Steele looking his way. Steele had his back to the cherrywood bar, one boot heel hooked over the brass rail and a glass of whiskey in his hand. There was, Durk thought, something like mockery in the big man's eyes.

Durk Pastor cursed under his breath. Some day he and Steele would lock horns, but now was not the time. Steele was disliked on this range as much as Durk Pastor. He was a bad man to fool with and he was fast with a gun. Durk knew that a lot of folks were wondering which one of them would come out on top in a shoot-out. One of these days they would have a chance to find out. It couldn't go on much longer.

Bart Steele owned the big 77 ranch at the lower end of the valley. He had been well on his way to gobbling up the entire range until Durk Pastor came along.

Ten years ago Durk had robbed and killed old John Banks, the express agent, down in Ranger, Texas. Durk had gotten away clean, certain that no one had seen him. He had come north to this town of Deertrail and bought the big Horseshoe ranch at the upper end of the valley. He had looked out over the rich green land and told himself that some day he would own the whole shebang.

He had done all right for himself. He had hired some tough riders and showed a lot of folks that he meant business. Steele was the one man he couldn't handle. They had a certain respect for each other, but they weren't kidding themselves. They knew that some day one of them would have to go.

Durk met Steele's eyes, and for a long moment they stared at each other, then Steele turned as the Mexican string band began to play a lively tune. A girl in a green dress came from the rear of the barroom and smiled at the crowd. Then she began to move in time to the music, whirling about the room in a gay dance of the Border land.

Durk Pastor forgot about the note he had received; he forgot about everything except this slender, dark-eyed girl named Lorna Kane. She affected him as no other woman ever had. She was beautiful, and that slow smile of hers drove him wild.

Sadie Hogan moved up beside Durk, but he did not take his eyes from the dancer.

"I've seen you watching her before, Durk," Sadie said. "You like her, don't you?"

He nodded and moistened his lips. "She's too good to be working in this dive of yores."

Sadie's fleshy face turned gloomy. "You're always running my place down, Durk, always giving me the cold shoulder. I don't see why you can't be a little nicer to me. I like you, Durk, and — and I've always wanted to know you better. This place makes a lot of money. We could have some high times together."

A scowl soured his face, and he said irritably, "Why don't you beat it?"

Sadie stared absently at the big ruby ring on her left hand. There was a hurt look on her face. "I'm sorry, Durk," she said. "I didn't mean to get you upset."

She moved heavily across the room and Durk did not even glance in her direction. He had eyes only for Lorna Kane, and watching her, he told himself the girl would fit in very nicely at that big log house of his. He had been thinking about it ever since Lorna Kane's arrival here three days ago.

THE girl circled the cleared space in the center of the room. She came close to Durk's table and pirouetted before him. She gazed at him steadily, showing her white teeth in that tantalizing smile.

Durk felt the hot blood surging into his cheeks, pounding in his throat. He was aware that his hands were pressed hard against the edge of the table. Then she moved on, and Durk Pastor knew disappointment. He watched her as she spun along the bar and he cursed when a cowhand made a playful pass at her. Then she stopped again, this time in front of Bart Steele, and she was giving the big man a provocative smile, as though, Durk thought, she were dancing especially for him.

Durk Pastor half arose from his chair before he caught himself. He sat down slowly, his insides cold. He put his hand around the whiskey glass and gripped it hard.

Then the dance ended. The music stopped and the girl ducked quickly through the crowd and was gone the way she had come.

A little sigh went past Durk's lips, and he reached for his tobacco sack. His fingers touched the piece of paper in his shirt pocket. He had forgotten about it while the girl danced. Now his eyes moved once more to the slatted doors, and he wondered what this gent who had sent him the note would look like.

Probably some fuzzy-faced kid who wasn't dry behind the ears, who didn't know the first thing about handling a gun. Durk would kill him, and that would be the end of it. Durk's neighbors would fear him even more, and Bart Steele, since he had never witnessed Durk's draw, would get a chance to see how fast his enemy was.

The big clock back of the bar struck eleven. Impatience began to gnaw at Durk. What was this Tommy Banks waiting for? Why didn't he come and get it over with?

Durk had the impression that everybody in the room was watching him. He saw old Limpy Smith at the bar, talking with Sadie Hogan. Big, fat Sadie, who was trying mighty hard to get herself a man. Durk wondered, briefly, if he had missed a bet by not playing up to the old gal.

He glanced once more at the door, then sat up straight in his chair when he saw Lorna Kane come back into the room. The girl looked his way, and he thought there was an invitation in her dark eyes. He felt a little dizzy as he got up and started across the room toward her.

A man at a card table said, "It's almost midnight, Durk. Think he's coming?

Pastor did not answer, did not even glance at the man, for he had the girl on his mind, and she was still looking at him and smiling.

As he reached the end of the bar, she began moving along it toward him. She passed Bart Steele and put her eyes on the big man briefly. Steele stepped out from the bar and laid a hand on her bare arm. The girl drew away, and Durk felt the hot blood begin to pound through his veins. He moved faster until he stopped beside Steele.

"Don't touch her again, Bart!"

Steele turned slowly and faced him. The big man's eyes were very bright. "And if I do?"

"Then I'll have to kill yuh, Bart."

It was very still in the room now, and the crowd was like so many statues, watching and, Durk thought, hoping.

Steele took one step away from the girl. If there was emotion in him, it did not show on his face.

"It might as well be now as later, Pastor," he said. "Let's see how much yuh've got on the ball."

They were both moving then, their hands whipping down. Two shots sounded as one, and two bullets burned through flesh and bone. Steele twisted around and looked at the girl called Lorna Kane. His lips moved, but no words came. He sank to the floor, and Durk watched him through eyes that were dimming fast.

STEELE was dead and Durk knew that in a minute he would be dead, too. He put one hand on the bar to steady himself and through the haze, he saw Lorna Kane's face. He remembered the smile and wondered why it was no longer on her red lips. Then Durk Pastor was down on the floor, and the breath had gone out of him.

Sadie Hogan came forward and knelt beside Durk Pastor. After a moment, the fat woman arose slowly and faced Lorna Kane. There was bitterness in Sadie's eyes. "You did it on purpose," she said. "You made them kill each other. I know, because I've been watching you."

There was a deep sorrow in the dancing girl's eyes. "They were both bad," she said. "Durk Pastor killed a harmless old man to get the money to buy his place here. He thought he was safe, that no one would ever find out. He didn't know that John Banks' kid was in the express office that night."

Limpy Smith stared at the girl queerly. "It must have been you that put that note on my door," he said.

The girl nodded. She said, as if she were talking to herself, "I've been a long time finding him. I changed my name and kept going from one town to another. I couldn't use a gun on him, but I saw that he paid."

Limpy Smith swallowed hard. He said, "Then — then you're —"

She nodded again. "Yes, I'm Tommy Banks."

Reading Sign on Next Month's Top-Flight Yarns!

THE neighbors consider him an outcast and string barbed wire to fence him off, but when drought blasts the range Barry Merrano knows just when to fight, and when to be a good neighbor in MERRANO OF THE DRY COUNTRY, a punch-packed novelet by Louis L'Amour which headlines our next issue.

RANGE detective Halpern risks his life when he joins a gang of rustling outlaws—but his undercover activities push the coyotes out of hiding to become targets for the law in HANG-NOOSE TRAIL, by Allan K. Echols, another exciting novelet coming next month.

ALWAYS ready to help, Swap and Whopper become weather-fixers when rain is wanted—but when the shower becomes a flood, and no ark handy, the wandering waddies have their troubles in THE SCREWBEAN SLEETHERDER, a novelet by Syl MacDowell which packs a laugh on every page.

IN NEXT month's issue, John A. Thompson continues his series on Lost Mines of the West with TEXAS GOLD, a colorful and interesting story of a Lone Star State bonanza, the hidden treasure of the Guadalupes, that has never been found to this day.

LOTS of other swell yarns next month, too—short stories by your favorite authors, plus features and departments. A grand number, first page to last! And—keep your weather eye peeled for the next great adventure of El Halcon, coming soon!

A Complete Novelet

Swiftly Jay Lucas threw down and squeezed the trigger

Hell and Low Water

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

CHAPTER I

For the Ranchers

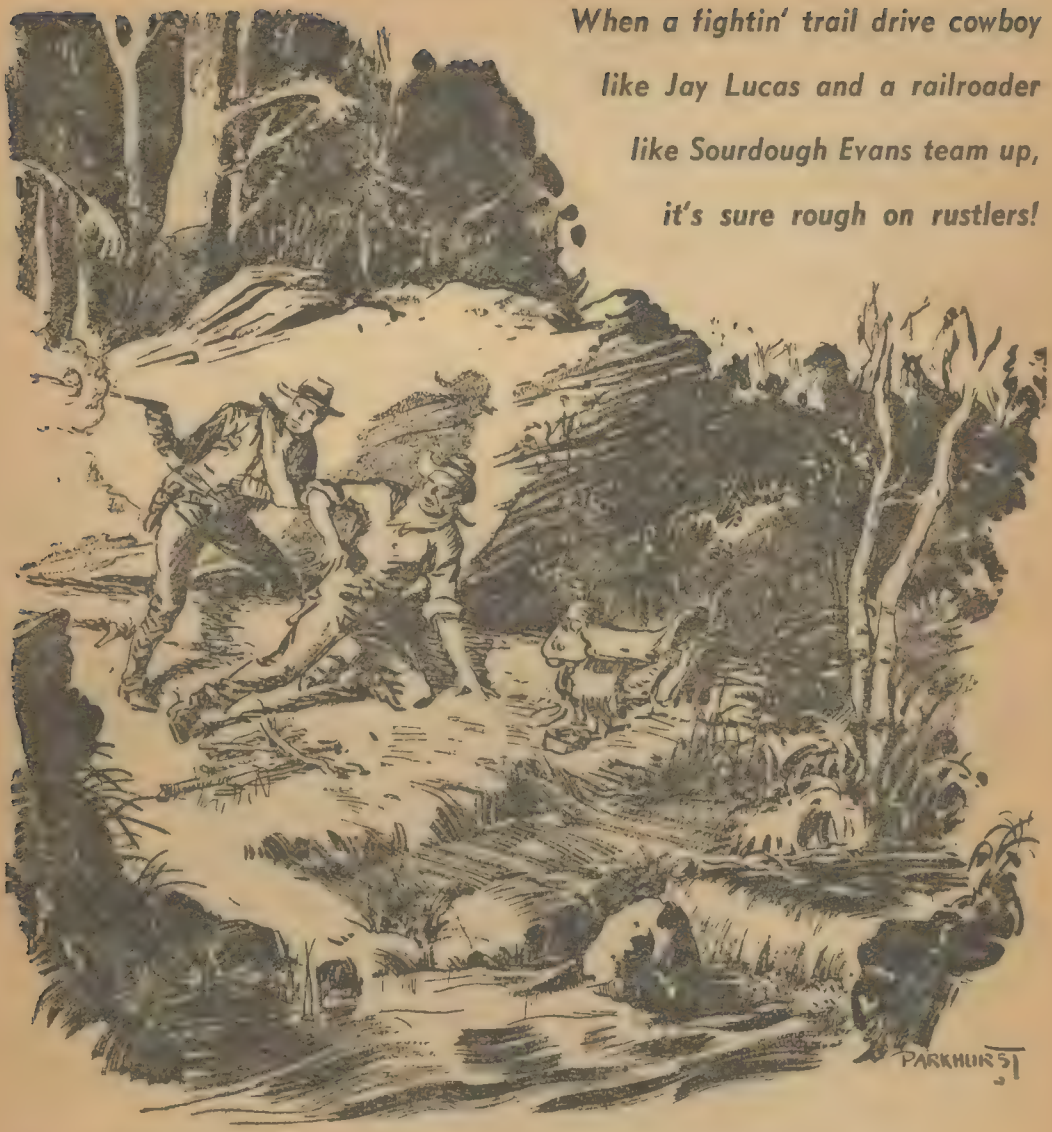
JAY LUCAS straightened his back and turned to glance at an oldster score-hacking a two-tie log with a double-bitted ax. A slow grin curled up young Jay's mouth corners. It seemed a bit incongruous that he and old Lafe Enright, two of the best tophands in the Wood River country, should be up here in a railroad tie camp.

Lafe had ramrodded the D Bar L, old Dunc Lane's spread, for which Jay Lucas had ridden for three years. Today, at the time of the big fall gather, they were here cutting ties.

It was tough work, from dawn till sunset, yet they made no complaints. When certain ranchers in the valley below had continued to buck a branch line railroad project up through badland dry country, Lafe and Jay were among the few who had favored the scheme.

Chief of those against it was Chad Fairburn, foreman of the Slippery Crescents outfit. It was Chad again who would boss the big trail herd shortly to start on its

When a fightin' trail drive cowboy like Jay Lucas and a railroader like Sourdough Evans team up, it's sure rough on rustlers!



long trek over dry country to Three Hills.

Jay had repped more than once for Dunc Lane on the trail. He had a strong suspicion as to why Fairburn and certain of his friends bucked the railroad's coming, and he knew that Fairburn's influence was strong.

Picking up a whetstone, Jay Lucas strode over to Lafe Enright. It was his one best means of making the old ramrod rest.

"Better set and palaver a while, Lafe," he said. "We're way ahead of schedule. . . . I wonder how the big gather's comin'."

Enright started, a frown clouding his seamy face. The subject seemed distasteful. For some time he had tried to get Dunc Lane to break with Fairburn and his gang. Enright knew that unless the branch line was pushed through, a lot of the smaller ranchers like Lane could eventually be frozen out—stolen out by such men as Fairburn.

"Yeah, we're well ahead of schedule, Jay boy," he answered. "Soon we'll begin the haul, soon's roundup is done an' we

can get some help. . . . Reckon Fairburn'll be bossin' the trail outfit again, huh? Did yuh hear, definite?"

Lucas nodded, and there was no smile on his mouth.

"That's right. I heard all about it when I rode down after grub, Sunday. Ten Barton's sidin' him. They should have the last of the gather rounded up tomorrow or the next day, and then—"

He broke off, shrugging. Enright understood the rest—the beginning of the long dry trek to the railroad shipping point and the usual losses of stock en route.

OLD LAFE snorted and stuffed a wedge of tobacco inside a cheek. He spat testily and got to his feet, his eyes flashing sharply as he turned his glance on Lucas.

"Nobody can tell me Fairburn runs a trail herd straight, son," he said vehemently. "I never could believe that even across that dry country they should have to be so many dry camps. You drove stage along that route two years and know it better'n most. What's yore opinion?"

Lucas continued to rotate his whetstone along the edge of his ax. He spat sharply on the stone face, then glanced quickly up at his tie-camp partner.

"I've always liked to keep my mouth buttoned up, Lafe," he answered. "If it wasn't for my suspicions that Fairburn and Barton are wideloopin', I wouldn't be up here. Why are they so strong against the branch line comin' through? It's easy to figger out. You know as well as I do, that not anywheres near all the losses they report are losses, actual. But they're slick. Any time I've ridden with them, they shore cover up aplenty. I got ideas, but—uh—"

Both men swung as a rider appeared at the edge of the small cut clearing. He was Cart Lane, Dunc's nephew, who had taken over the D Bar L when Lafe Enright quit. Lucas got to his feet and strode forward.

Cart Lane dismounted, and with Lucas beside him, strode up to Enright.

"How's, Cart?" old Lafe greeted. "Somethin' special stuck in yore craw?"

The young waddy nodded.

"Yeah. The gather's finished and Uncle wants me to rep for him, but—" He broke off shrugging.

"Go ahead, Cart," Lucas prompted. "Get it off yore chest. What's worryin' yuh?"

"It don't seem to smell so good, Jay. Why should Chad Fairburn have asked for me special? You know how he hates me since I jumped him last year about the railroad business. He knows I have some suspicions about him, but I haven't been able to convince Uncle Dunc. I think, along with some of the other smaller ranchers, Uncle's sort of scared of Fairburn. Anyhow I had words with Uncle—threatened to pull right out if'n he didn't send up and get you to rep."

"What?" Lucas spun sharply, his forehead ploughed into deep furrows.

"That's right, Jay. You know that trail better'n most and it's high time we had a showdown. I've got Miff Stanzel of the Two Slash sidin' me and some of the others. We figgered yuh could draw up a sketch of the route before the trail herd starts movin' and lay it down so Fairburn'd have to foller that route. How about it, Jay? When the shippin's done, I'll see to it that yuh get all the team and man help yuh need here, and for yore tie haul."

Lucas and Enright exchanged meaning glances. Old Lafe nodded.

"I—uh—was hopin' for somethin' like this to happen, Jay," he said slowly. "I can get along up here if Cart'll send up a man in yore place. Yuh'd best go take a real look-see, boy, huh?"

Jay Lucas hestitated only a moment or so, then nodded.

"All right. I'll trail along. You go back and have the interested owners meet at the D Bar L, Cart. I'll be in at sundown, and we'll make a medicine talk."

Cart Lane smiled and quickly mounted his black bronc. Lucas and Enright watched him ride out, then Lucas turned to his woods partner. There was a slow smile across the younger man's mouth.

"Looks like I've done stuck my neck inside a short loop, Lafe," he said, chuckling softly.

Old Enright coughed. He aimed a stream of tobacco juice at the top of a nearby stump and wiped his mustached mouth with the back of a gnarled hand.

"Yuh'll have to watch yoreself every step of the way, son," he said. "Fairburn'll be fit to be tied when he learns yuh're

reppin' again. . . . Now here's somethin'. Yuh'll find a real friend on the trail in old Sourdough Evans, the cook. He's got only one eye, but it sees a lot and what he don't see with it, he catches with his ears. Try, while yuh're out, to find out what yuh can about the progress the railroad surveyors and gradin' gangs are makin'. They should be into the collars sometime this fall."

They shook hands, and Jay Lucas strode off to catch up his horse.

As he rode down to the bottomland range he started plotting a line of action for the future, fixing the route of the trail in his mind, visualizing the watering streams and holes he knew existed, and without which a big herd could suffer heavy losses.

HE ARRIVED at the D Bar L to find three ranch owners and Chad Fairburn assembled there.

The big foreman of the Slippery Crescents sneered as he listened to Lucas outline a route for the herd. When asked for his opinion, he shrugged.

"It's up to you," he answered indifferently. "If this is how yuh want it, all right, so long as Lucas don't forget who's bossin' the outfit.

Fairburn shot a barbed glance Jay Lucas' way. But the young waddy met the challenge with his own steel-gray eyes. His lips moved as if to retort but he held his tongue.

His sketch was approved.

"Of course I can't guarantee water at all the places I've marked," he warned. "But if there's water anywheres, it should be where I've made them crosses. It might be as well if I scouted ahead of the herd."

Old Dunc Lane immediately approved that idea.

"That's a good plan, Chad," he said to Fairburn. "Suit you?"

Again Fairburn shrugged.

The meeting broke up. Lucas informed the trail boss that he could make it to camp at about sundown the following day.

"Got to pick me a string of broncs," he said.

Fairburn nodded, his heavy mouth curling.

"Sundown'll be just right, Lucas. We'll be lookin' for yuh."

The way he said it didn't set right with Jay Lucas as he strode out to check up Dunc Lane's cavvy. . . .

The following evening, as planned, Lucas rode into camp with his string, to be greeted by old "Sourdough" Evans whose one eye glinted brightly as he shook hands with his friend. But Chad Fairburn rode up and interrupted further pleasantries.

"Soon as yuh've eaten, Lucas," he said," "yuh'd best ride out and nighthawk the bronc cavvy."

"Yuh mean, I . . . All right, Chad."

Lucas turned away, disappointed, disgusted. Fairburn had already begun to appply the rowels. It had been agreed that Lucas was to act as water scout, and right off Fairburn had put him on nighthawk duty. As the trail boss rode off to give directions to some of the hands butchering a beef steer, old Sourdough touched Lucas' arm.

"Best not let too much sand set in yore craw, son," he advised. "It's a long ways from here to Three Hills sidin'. Start buckin' the big boss right off and yuh won't be no more use to the decent ranchers than a horn toad in a quart sealer. Here, get outside this plate of stew while I fix yuh a night snack—and stay wise, boy. Hang and rattle."

Lucas could not help but enjoy old Sourdough's philosophy. If he had to see this business through, and he most certainly intended to, he would have to keep his tail curled, his tongue in his cheek and his eyes and ears wide open.

The cavvy broncs had gone out before Jay's arrival and he located them a mile from camp, grazing in scattered bunches. Out along the northwestern horizon sheet lightning shuddered in its ghostly dance. As Lucas watched the display, his brows now and then puckered when a wicked stab of forked lightning punctured the harmless, shuddering sheet flashes.

No cowhand, night herding, or nighthawking, welcomed the sudden crashing electrical storms along the trail. Lucas had more than once seen the disastrous results of such a storm, especially when cows and steers were restless in a dry camp.

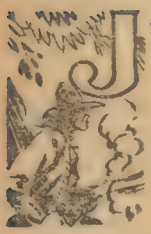
Tonight, the big herd seemed contented, having only recently watered. But along this trail, through the dry belt, if a stream

or set of springs happened to have run dry, forked lightning and barrage thunder could swiftly cause trouble, plenty of trouble, as frenzied stock hurricaned before the wind in mad stampede.

Lucas whistled as he slowly made a closer gather of the cavvy stock. Now and then a coyote wailed, bansheelike, as if in protest at the fluttering display of lightning.

CHAPTER II

Night Visitors



JAY LUCAS was eating his lunch at midnight when one of the cavvy broncs suddenly reared and whirled, snorting. The cowboy's hand flashed to his gun butt, for he was sure he had glimpsed a ridden horse moving into a patch of buck brush ahead. Then he was sure he was right, for he heard a sudden drumming of hoofs. He touched his bronc lightly with a spur and rode swiftly down on a group of spooked horses.

He hazed the frightened broncs back closer to the main bunch. As they quieted down, he wondered just why a rider should be prowling about the cavvy at this time of night. No member of the trail herd outfit, unless he had some ulterior motive, had any business riding in even close. But Lucas shrugged, though he could not understand it.

When the broncs resumed their grazing, he rode around in a wide circle, but failed to pick up any sign of a rider.

At dawn, on his return of the cavvy to the rope corral at camp, Lucas made no mention of his strange night visitor. But his suspicions were whetted. He was now doubly alert.

Two days dragged by, with Lucas disgustedly riding drag, alternating with nighthawk duty. Then came the sharpest shock of all when Fairburn ordered him to hitch up a freight wagon and drive north to pick up supplies for the chuckwagon.

"North, about a day and a half, Lucas," Fairburn said, "yuh'll come up on a nester settlement. We need fresh vegetables, and if they's a store up there, bring in whatever Sourdough wants."

Fairburn's leering grin caused Lucas' hackles to rise. Sourdough had never mentioned that he was running short of supplies.

As Fairburn rode off, Lucas moved up close to the cook.

"You short of supplies, Sourdough?" he asked.

"Huh? Uh—no, son, I ain't. Course we can always handle fresh vegetables—spuds and such, same as we can get along without 'em. But they's no call to send a tophand out on a freight job. Fairburn's puttin' the spurs to yuh. He figgered yuh'll up and quit the outfit when he ordered yuh on the freight haul. Yuh was smart yuh said nothin', because if yuh'd jumped him, he'd have fired yuh and it seems to me that's what he'd like more'n anythin' . . . They's storm clouds rollin' up, boy. But hitch up. I'll keep my old eye peeled while yuh're away. I got bones that tell me Fairburn's about to uncoil a loop."

Miserable, boiling mad, Lucas hitched a team and headed north, feeling a deep sense of defeat. Anything could happen in the three days he would be absent, enough to ruin his scheme to keep an eye on Fairburn and his friends. . . .

A storm which washed out a log bridge held Lucas up on his return trip from the small settlement. He'd been successful in buying only a single sack of scabby potatoes and some grub-bitten cabbages.

Once across the creek, he pushed his team sharply. He knew the route along which the trail herd should have moved and, by rights, Fairburn should have had the herd bedded down at Old Christmas Creek this evening. Lucas headed his wagon that way, cutting in on an old Mormon freight trail as a short cut.

He reached the languid creek as the sun, in a grandiose display of flamboyance, settled to flood the oasis with a bath of rose, gold and light purple. But to his amazement he failed to pick up a single sign of the herd.

He watered his team and drove back a few miles along the route he had sketched out, but to no avail. Then suddenly it dawned on him that Fairburn had deliberately swung off the planned route. He could see clearly now why Fairburn had sent him north on that cooked-up trip for supplies that weren't needed.

"He wanted a dry camp," Lucas told himself and a scowl clouded his face.

There faced him now the job of finding the herd, a difficult task with team and wagon.

The necessity for feeding his team stalemated him, and at one point he was inclined to ride and lead, leaving the wagon here, for Fairburn had outwitted him, bested him. But intead he elected to cut in north, and then swing back a point to westward as he cut the rugged badlands. . . .

IT WAS the following evening, still driving, when he fetched up with cow sign far to the north of the scheduled route. The first sign he caught was that of thirsty, bawling cattle. He touched up his team and. before dusk settled, drove in on the chuckwagon. The camp was deserted save for old Sourdough Evans who lay sprawled out under a wagon sleeping.

He roused old Evans, whose hand streaked for a gun that was not there.

"Uh . . . Oh, it's you, Jay! Where the devil yuh been? Fairburn's been away, too, and—uh—" Sourdough began to rub his empty eye socket vigorously.

"I've been down to Old Christmas, Sourdough. What's gone wrong? How come the herd was swung off my sketched trail route?"

"Yuh're askin' me, son? All I do around here is say, 'Yes, Boss, no, boss,' till I'm sick to the stummick. I ain't as young as I used to be, so I got to button my lip and do like I'm told. Two of the good hands, Nevada and Sam Coleman, have been askin' me questions, but I don't know nothin'. I—uh—" Sourdough broke off sharply at the pound of hoofbeats.

Lucas swung, to glimpse Fairburn and Ten Barton riding up.

Fairburn dismounted and stalked up to stand spraddle-legged before Jay Lucas, his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt.

"Day late, Lucas," he said.

For a long moment their eyes locked glances and old Sourdough closed a hand over a meat cleaver. But Lucas all at once relaxed.

"Yeah, Chad," he said slowly. "No wonder. I was lookin' for you and the herd along Old Christmas Crick, where yuh should have been. How come yuh're so far off the trail?"

Fairburn's eyes flashed, his lips curled.

"That's what's likely to happen when a boss has to do some ridin' and leaves the job to somebody else, Lucas," he said. "Somehow, the point spooked and swung steady off to the north and we've hit plumb into another dry camp. . . . Get ready to relieve Nevada on nighthawk duty. I want him back with the herd. It might be hard to hold tonight, especially if that west storm blows our way. . . . The cavvy's too far south. When yuh take over, haze the broncs up closer to the cattle. If the storm hits us, we'll be able to hold the critters better if the cavvy and herd ain't too far apart. Savvy?"

"Yeah, I think I do, Chad," Lucas replied, and his tone of voice caused Fairburn's right hand to move from its restful position in the gun-belt. But he shrugged and turned to stride over to his horse which he ground-hitched while he and Barton strode in under the fly of Sourdough's wagon to build a sandwich.

Lucas unhitched his team and turned them out to be picked up and hazed to join the cavvy later. He was saddling a bronc when old Sourdough came up with a night snack of beef sandwiches.

"My ears is workin' good tonight, Jay," the cook whispered. "Watch yoreself. They's no dew on the grass—shore storm sign. There'll be lightin' bugs flashin' this night, boy, if I don't miss my guess. No reason in the world why you should have to relieve Nevada. He's a good nighthawk, but—uh—I think yuh're readin' sign right, huh?"

"Yeah, Sourdough. I'm wise. I got wise first when Chad told me to haze the cavvy up closer to the herd. Don't quite figger what play he has in mind, but I'll find out. I'll tip Nevada off to watch out. We need some friends, I think, because—"

A fierce crash of thunder to westward stopped him. He adjusted the strings which tied his slicker back of the cantle, and hooked his gun-belt up a notch tighter.

As he rode on toward the cavvy, his mind was a clutter of thoughts. He thought a lot about Sourdough Evans. Sourdough hadn't been a ranch cook all his life. He had lost an eye and three fingers of his left hand in a railroad wreck down south, not long after his promotion from fireboy to engineer. More than once

the old cook had entertained Lucas with stories of what his travels had been until his compensation money had been spent.

Lucas' horse suddenly shied and through the scrub sagebrush and greasewood ahead he glimpsed movement. He came up on "Nevada" in the act of hazing a strayed bunch back to the main herd.

SHORTLY Jay Lucas was riding alongside Nevada who expressed sharp surprise when acquainted with Fairburn's orders.

"Sam Coleman and I've been smellin' out some bad sign, Jay," he said sharply. "It looks bad we have to haze the cavvy so close to the cattle herd, huh?"

"It *is* bad, Nevada. When yuh join the herd riders, yuh might tip off one or two of the boys yuh know we can trust. Fairburn's up to somethin'. I'll be alone here, so I'll have to leave it up to you about wisin' the boys up."

A sharp fork of lightning struck ground not far distant, and the resultant crash of thunder was terrifying. Lucas unhitched his slicker and put it on as he and Nevada began to haze the cavvy broncs up toward the bawling cattle herd. . . .

The night was wild as Jay rode around his cavvy bunch, hazing them into closer formation in a shallow basin. Between the drumfire crashes of thunder he could hear the bawling of the restless shorthorns. He shuddered. Not a single horse of the cavvy had his head down. Eyes wild, they stood with heads high, tails switching sharply, although there were no flies to pester them.

Then suddenly the sharp crack of gunfire attended the hissing flash of fork lightning. A horse reared, to come plunging down on his muzzle. Two more shots punctured the mad crash of thunder. A slug whined over Jay Lucas' head and for a moment he was stunned by the sudden shock.

But the next moment he reached through the slash in the side of his slicker and fisted his gun, touching his bronc with a spur. The cavvy had broken. Rain slanted sharply down, driven hard by a screeching westerly wind which it was almost impossible to face.

In the mad flashes of lightning, Lucas saw the cavvy lead swing a point to eastward. This was better sign, but short-lived. As he swung off to tail the maddened broncs, he glimpsed two riders thundering in to turn the cavvy leaders. Gunfire cut horizontal gashes in the lightning-stabbed gloom. The cowboy jerked up his Colt, but the range was too long for any sort of accurate shooting, especially in this lightning-slashed night.

All at once he gasped, pulling his horse up sharply as he saw the horse of the lead rider ahead buckle and spill, pitching his rider clear. The rider recovered and whirled. With his riding partner's help, he swung up in back of the saddle and shortly the horse with its double load was lost to view.

Lucas socked his gun back into the holster and spurred up his bronc. He rode down on the fallen horse and dismounted. The unfortunate creature groaned as it struggled. Lucas made a clucking sound with his tongue against the back of his upper teeth as he drew his gun. There was no other way out. A single shot put the bronc out of its misery. It had broken a leg in a badger hole.

Down on a knee, Lucas waited for a sharp flash of lightning. He wanted to read brand sign, wanted badly to find identification.

When a sharp forked flash struck, he didn't wince. He scarcely heard the attendant crash of thunder. Eyes wide, he was reading the Slippery Crescents brand. The brand of Chad Fairburn's outfit!

In the saddle again, Jay Lucas rode on. The cavvy was in full gallop, heading directly across the neck of the bedground where night riders attempted to pacify and hold the milling cattle. He had evidence now that Fairburn had deliberately caused this mad stampede.

The horse he had been forced to shoot carried the Slippery Crescents brand, but was a bay. All the broncs in Fairburn's own personal string were grays, or roan. That meant that Fairburn had outside help posted along the route, ready to touch off the fuses at the proper moment, and that moment had certainly come with this howling, crashing electrical storm.

Lucas was sure that Fairburn had read the writing on the wall, knew that the coming of the railroad would put an end to his chances for illicit gains from stock "lost" in such stampedes as he had touched off tonight. It was all clear, but the cow-

boy groaned at the realization of his helplessness.

A SAVAGE mood possessed him as he attempted to get more speed out of his frightened bronc. Suddenly he was conscious of a new thunder ahead—the thunder of thousands of tramping hoofs.

"The herd!" he gasped. "It's broke!"

The wildly hurricaning cavvy broncs had done their grim work, lighting the fuse which detonated the frenzied shorthorns into an uncontrollable exodus from their bedground, sending them lunging wildly on to the buttes and badlands to the northeast.

Lucas thought of old Dunc Lane and the other smaller ranchers who stood to lose heavily from tonight's disaster. Most of them would be left with only nucleus breeder herds back on the valley range. Jay had little sympathy for Foss Cartmel, owner of the big Slippery Crescents outfit. Cartmel was a big man who, under Fairburn's influence, had steadily bucked the coming of the branch line on the grounds that it would split valuable rangeland.

A slow, mirthless grin wreathed Lucas' mouth as he thought of how cleverly Fairburn had slicked his boss. Chad and his cohorts would cash in in a big way this night. The price of cattle was high, especially on this improved shorthorn and Hereford stock.

There were left to Jay Lucas two avenues of action. He could ride in and palaver with the wise old Sourdough, or he could ride on and attempt to track down Fairburn alone. Perhaps on the way he could contact Nevada or some of the other trustworthy hands. Together they might decide on a plan of action.

He chose the latter course.

With the coming of quiet dawn which pushed as if ashamed through the last of night's shades, Jay Lucas dismounted, quivering in every nerve fibre. He had found Nevada!

NEXT MONTH

THE HANGNOOSE TRAIL

A Novelet by ALLAN K. ECHOLS

AND OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER III

Vanished Trail Herd

A PAIR of rolling, unseeing eyes, looked up at Lucas as he dropped to his knees beside the prone form of Nevada. Nevada was badly hit and couldn't last long. Jay thought his friend might never regain consciousness.

He brought water and worked over Nevada, and in time his efforts were rewarded as the young tophand forced a grin to his almost white lips.

"Jay—boy," he breathed, in a scarcely audible whisper. "Chad—got me. I drawed quick as I could, but he—he was with—Barton. I think I—winged Chad before I dropped. Both pulled down—on me but I'm shore it was Chad who—"

Lucas bit sharply into his lip as he held the shuddering, convulsing form of his friend tightly. He had never run across a man he had liked more than he liked Nevada, and had since the night they had made up after a sharp fist fight over a little red-headed girl at a schoolhouse dance four years ago.

Nevada's throat rattled. He had passed along—shot to death by Fairburn, and Jay Lucas' lips moved stiffly as he made a silent vow to pay off. . . .

Lucas had with him only the sodden lunch Sourdough Evans had fixed for him the previous night. He sat and ate it in the afternoon, as he gave his bronc time to feed on a small upland plateau. Not yet had the cowboy definitely cut the trail of the vanished herd.

He was staring off into nothingness as he sat hunkered, munching a sloppy sandwich when suddenly his horse snorted, whirling on his tether rope. Lucas' hand flashed for his gun, but the Colt was lying near his saddle. Two riders were coming through a narrow cut into the plateau. He got to his feet with some feeling of relief as he recognized the riders as "Bus" Tyler and Joe Menzies, cowhands from a ranch adjoining the D Bar L, but both men were shot up. Tyler rode in close to Menzies. Bus carried his left arm in a sling, and led Joe's mount. Joe was sagged forward in

the saddle, clutching the horn firmly, his face twisted with pain.

Lucas moved out to meet them, but he got a bitter, savagely snarled greeting from Tyler.

"How come yuh let that cavvy get away on yuh, Lucas?" Tyler challenged, his eyes blazing.

A mirthless grin played with Lucas' mouth. These men were blaming him for the night's disaster.

"I'm surprised to learn Chad Fairburn's got you twisted, too, Bus," he said in a slow, cold drawl. "Yuh had a pow-wow with him, huh?"

"Yeah. He's gone on ahead with some of the boys to try and recover the herd. Claims you drawed and shot him. Said yuh was in cahoots with gunnies hired by the railroad outfit to spook the herd so's the ranchers would be glad to approve the comin' uh the branch line. Seems like it smacks of truth, Lucas."

Jay Lucas winced. It was tough to take these charges, especially as they came from men with whom he had been friendly.

"How come you and Joe was shot up, Bus?" he asked. "Couple of railroad graders pop up out of the sagebrush and clip yuh?"

Tyler started, his right hand flashing down to his gun butt, but he seemed to remember that its chambers were empty.

"Could easy be, Lucas," he said heavily. "Chad claimed yuh had friends helpin' yuh spook the cavvy right across the bedground of the main herd."

Lucas' cold grin widened.

"Was that why Chad ordered me to nighthawk the cavvy, to relieve Nevada?" he asked. "He knew I had widelooper allies already on hand, to stampede the cavvy? Did yuh fall for a story like that, Bus? If so, yuh ain't got the brains of a blue heron. Chad Fairburn wanted Nevada up where he could keep close tabs on him. He wanted me out nighthawkin' because he knew his own wideloopers were on hand, but that I'd get the blame!

"Why was it he sent me on that three-day freight haul, after supplies Sourdough didn't need? He wanted me out of camp so's he could order the herd swung up into these badlands, off the route I'd sketched!"

LUCAS' eyes burned steadily into Tyler's. His cheek muscles twitched as his anger mounted.

"Nevada, my best friend, is dead, Bus," he went on grimly. "Before he cashed, in my arms, he told me Chad shot him. It was Nevada, not me, who winged Chad. Now yuh'd best get Joe on back quick to Sourdough. Get both yoreselves fixed up, then if yuh got some common savvy left, ride on up to the D Bar L and other outfits and have 'em send a posse along. I'm ridin' Chad Fairburn's trail. Can't yuh see Chad's pulled the biggest cattle steal ever in the history of Wyomin'?"

Bus Tyler swallowed hard, his Adam's apple convulsing sharply, and Jay Lucas enjoyed the cowhand's discomfort.

"I—I should've knowed better, Jay," Bus suddenly gulped. "It was yore word of the killin' of Nevada that cinched it. Yuh'd never have cut down on yore best friend. I—I was a fool. I could've shot Chad if only I'd knowed. I'll have a posse ride out from camp, pronto."

But Lucas shook his head.

"Ain't no more'n a single bronc or two there, Bus," he said. "Chad saw to it old Sourdough would be left alone last night."

He turned to Joe Menzies, who in spite of his pain, forced a grin. Tyler stretched his hand down now. Lucas squeezed it.

"I'll do what I can, Jay," Tyler said hoarsely. "But yuh'd better shake her easy, boy. Yuh'll be ridin' through plenty bushwhack country—alone. So long, and the best of luck."

Shortly Lucas was in the saddle, determined to take Fairburn's trail. . . .

From a point of vantage, Jay Lucas reined in his horse and, in the aftermath of a glorious sunset which flushed the rugged country beyond, watched a few scattered head of cattle grazing in the bottomland. Suddenly he tanged the acrid scent of birch-wood smoke. He had come a long way on a hungry stomach. The scent of the campfire whetted a gnawing appetite.

As he continued to watch the small, scattered bunches of cattle, he concluded that they no longer formed part of the main, rustled herd. They were strays which had fallen away from the main bunch.

He now turned his horse into a patch of junipers. The wood smoke bothered

him. He hoped that he might fetch up with some of the trustworthy cowhands and form a posse, but he wasn't taking any chances, exposing himself. He would sit it out until dusk, then go down afoot to scout.

His horse hitched in cover, he now started on down, cursing now and then as a foot caught a rolling stone which sent him slithering down an embankment in a clatter of rubble. Shadows were skipping through the sparse scrub brush below as dusk swiftly sifted down on the wild lands.

Suddenly he froze. A point to the south he glimpsed movement—a man afoot, walking alongside a ridden horse.

"Injuns!" he told himself, with disappointment.

After all his caution he had just been stealing up on an Indian hunting camp. But all at once a shrill whinny sounded off left. Lucas spun, melting into the shadows of a wild fruit thicket.

Crouched, gun ready, he eased through the brush. Shortly, flat to the ground, he peered through the half light at a group of three men seated around a camp fire. When his eyes became more accustomed to the bad light, he flicked his tongue across his dry lips as he saw plainly that one of the men had his left arm in a sling.

"Chad Fairburn!"

Jay was sure of the identity. He figured Chad's arm was plenty sore. Likely enough he'd got the Indian squaw there in camp to fix it up for him with some native herb potion, and figured to hole up here at the badlands until the arm was mended and the land a bit clear for his get-away.

Carefully parting scrub brush, Jay Lucas stole on.

He froze as he saw one of the men get to his feet. "Goin' to tend their hosses, I figger," Lucas told himself.

The odds against him were reduced, but he would rather have had all the trio in view, for his plan was plenty audacious. He figured to jump Fairburn with a hope of regaining at least part of all the money Fairburn had received for the widelooped stock.

POISED behind a heavy wolf willow clump, he heard Chad Fairburn's voice plainly, then Ten Barton's.

"I can't see it yore way, Ten," the big ramrod was saying gruffly. "I figger to hole up here a spell. Those Wood River ranchers'll get word to the outside pronto and we'll be hunted. Anyhow, I can't do much travelin' till this arm heals. Yuh can take yore cut and hightail if yuh're a-mind to. I—"

Both men swung around sharply. Dry twigs had cracked under Lucas' feet. Fairburn's right hand flashed to his gun butt and two slugs cut brush close above the cowboy's head as he leaped to one side and pulled.

Horses snorted. Lucas heard the stamp of hoofs and the sound of a man yelling. Fairburn and Barton were on their feet, separated now, and in cover. A shot forced Lucas to move quickly from one clump to another. A bullet struck the edge of his belt buckle, glancing up to slit his skin across the left ribs sector. He winced at the sharp pain, and quivered at the realization of how close he had come to the end of all things.

Swiftly he half-rolled and threw down, squeezing his trigger. A man pitched forward. He hoped it was Fairburn.

All was deathly still now, far too quiet for comfort. The hidden cowboy, dared not move a step, but when he heard a stirring off his right front, he almost broke cover to go into action. Wisely, though, he held his hand, charging the sound to a stirring night breeze.

He was poised, ready for action, when sharp gunfire crashed. He spun, reeling back into the brush, scarcely knowing what had impelled him to turn and lunge forward. Something—it seemed like a heavy blow from the flat of a grain scoop—had struck his head.

Sagged against a clump of birch saplings, he felt warm blood coursing down his face. He could taste it, mingled with salty sweat. The sound of Fairburn's voice snapped him back into sensibility. The ex-trail boss was bellowing at his remaining companion.

"Should've held yore fire till yuh was plumb shore, Karlin! Now we don't know where he is and we can't take a chance huntin' through that brush. Saddle up a couple of broncs. We're hightailin'!"

Dizzy, Jay Lucas was forced to cling to the birches a moment or so, struggling to retrieve sufficient strength with which

to move into climactic action at this moment when Fairburn was alone. But when he moved away from his support, he sagged forward, stumbling on to the fringe of the brush, where he sank to his knees.

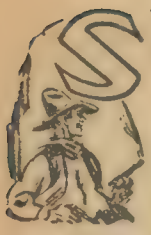
A gun lanced flame, but missed Lucas who stiffened and jerked up his own Colt. As he pulled he was conscious of a sharp *thupping* sound. His bullet had struck something solid.

Only dimly now could he hear muffled voices and the stamp of hoofs. He was not aware that he had hit Fairburn gravely, or that Karlin had to hoist his sagging companion into the saddle.

Overwhelming night engulfed Jay Lucas. The gods had favored him, for had Fairburn had any idea of his condition, right now Lucas would have been dead.

CHAPTER IV

Friendly Indians



SUNLIGHT cut through spaces in the birch and aspen clumps as Jay Lucas blinked owlishly. He mumbled something inarticulate, through swollen lips. When he attempted to move a terrific pain in the head almost blacked him out.

It was the sound of voices that, after a time, revived him. He lay a long moment, quivering. At last, with the help of strong fists pressed hard into the turf and leaf mould, he managed to sit up. Slowly, he got to his knees and crawled shakily to the thicket's edge.

His bloodshot eyes widened as he saw two Indians, a buck and a squaw, kneeling beside the prone form of Ten Barton. They were helping themselves to the possessions of Fairburn's ally.

Lucas called, and both the natives spun around, jaws sagging.

"How!" Jay Lucas said. "Stand back, or mebbe I'll shoot, *sabe?*"

The buck got to his feet, his black eyes flashing, but at the sight of Lucas' gun, his dark mask cracked in a smile.

"*Sabe,* mis-ter," he grunted. "We think it all right to take. Man dead. Others gone. You—you hit bad, yess?"

The cowboy slid a hand to the matted blood in his hair. There was stickiness there, too, and he glanced sharply at the fat squaw whom he had seen riding the cayuse the previous evening.

"I need some help," he said. "You fix me up, I pay yuh. But quick. Some fire and hot water, then yuh fix medicine, huh?"

The squaw went into action, while the buck strode forward to help Lucas to his feet.

"Me scout for railroad men," the Indian said.

"The railroad?"

"Unh! She's come, mis-ter. I keel two steer for men. Not rustlin', huh?"

A faint smile curled the corners of the cowboy's lips.

"No, I reckon we'll forget about it," he said. "But how far away is the outfit—the survey party?"

"Fi' mile. Grade crew come right on, not far back. Plenty men and mule. Need lot beef. . . . Now squaw feex you."

Lucas smiled gratefully as the squaw washed out his head crease and the jagged cut along his ribs. She chuckled softly when Jay winced as the herb lotion she clapped on his wounds bit sharply.

"No moch nice, but heap good," she assured.

She now turned to fix up food, and soon Jay Lucas was devouring a thick beef steak.

When he finished eating he examined Ten Barton's wallet which he had taken from the Indian buck. His eyes widened as he counted the money. Fairburn had made a good deal on the cattle. Smiling, Lucas peeled off a couple of bills and handed them to the Indian.

"You good feller, Joe," he said. "Buy plenty fancy fixin's for yore squaw, huh?"

The rest of the money, he figured, belonged to the ranchers of the valley—scant return indeed for their excellent stock. . . .

For the next three days, Jay Lucas moved slowly along with the Indians, having the dressings for his wounds changed twice each day.

Joe, the Indian, had told him he had watched Fairburn and his companion ride off and knew that the ex-trail boss was badly hit.

On the third evening Lucas and his Indian companions reached the railroad surveyors, and the chief grade engineer, a big man named Dave Macdonald.

"Got a pardner runnin' a tie camp for

yuh, right now, Macdonald," Lucas said. "Him and me always favored the buildin' of the branch line. How soon'll yuh be ready for the ties?"

Macdonald smiled. "Don't rush us too hard, cowboy," he replied. In his speech was a definite touch of Highland brogue. "Ye could start your haul any day ye like, but don't expect to be shippin' stock this year. Man alive! We'll be lucky to start rollin' cattle down by next fall. I think—"

Macdonald paused. Lucas was smiling.

"There'll be no cattle to ship until next fall at the earliest, Mac," the cowboy said, "and I'm not so shore we've seen the last of Fairburn. I shot him purty bad, and have a notion he'll organize a gang to come huntin' me. He's always been against the railroad, so mebbe you, too, will have to keep yore eyes peeled. He's a salty jasper and will be worse now he's on the owlhoot trail. . . Well, right now I reckon I'll be ridin' back home. The folks up the valley will be plumb glad to hear yuh're comin' right along."

AS HE glanced at Joe he saw that the Indian was pointing off to westward. Lucas glimpsed a posse of riders cutting through the scant brush. He recognized Cart Lane and old Sourdough Evans in the lead.

Shortly, Lucas was grinning broadly as he saw old Sourdough and Dave Macdonald with their arms flung about each other's shoulders. He chuckled at their friendly crossfire of insults.

"Why, yuh tight-fisted old mush-eatin' Highlander!" Sourdough growled. "I can hardly believe my eyes. It's been most twenty-two years since I fired the old Pioneer engine for you on the S and P swamp branch line!"

"Aye, and it is that, ye old owl-eyed mossyhorn," Macdonald returned, chuckling. "But, man dear, it's gr-rand to see ye again, Soordough."

Finally Jay Lucas took over and drew Sourdough to one side.

"Yuh'd best have the boys try to round up what scattered stock—hosses and cattle—they can," he advised. "Cows, special. Them critters'll have to go into the breeder pens, instead of goin' to the butcher. Fairburn's made a big clean out."

Sourdough called Cart Lane and turned the round up job over to him.

"You take over, son," he said. "Jay's used up and I'm too danged old for that sort of work. Keep yore eyes peeled for Chad and his pard. They'll be watchin' the backtrails a-plenty. . . ."

The following morning, Lucas and Sourdough rode on into the west. Later, when Lucas had handed the money to Dunc Lane for distribution, pro rata, to the ranchers, the cowboy rode up into the woods to rejoin his partner, Lafe Enright. . . .

The railroad activity moved at increased tempo. Within two months Lucas had begun his tie haul, with old Sourdough handling the cooking for the teamsters.

Back a few miles, though, disaster struck the engineer gangs, when a big trestle bridge was blown. Macdonald swore, but he brought in more men, and the bigger gangs required more food, more beef.

More stock than had been hoped for was recovered by Cart Lane and his riders. Dunc Lane and his neighbors started building up new herds, pooling all their stock and efforts, looking forward to a new autumn and a new fall gather and pool shipment.

Jay Lucas was trimmed down by hard work to a slab-sided man of muscle and sinew as he bossed his tie camp and haul outfits. But more than once he was stopped in his tracks when beef cattle headed for the railroad camps were rustled. For Fairburn still lurked in the country, bent on ruining the grading efforts, and Lucas was certain that some day he would have to meet the ex-ramrod face to face, gun muzzle to gun muzzle. It was in the cards.

Wherever he moved, Lucas was alert, always ready, as throughtout the winter and the following spring he assisted the grade engineers in getting timber for bridges and culverts, along with the thousands of ties.

At last came the fall gather. Tophands rode for no pay. They rode long hours without complaint, and fought off many a raiding band, suffering casualties, but asking no favors.

Then finally the steel was down. Old Sourdough Evans drove the last spike, chuckling as now and then he missed a stroke.

Forty cars had been promised the ranchers to carry their entire herd of shippers to Three Hills siding. No longer would they have to depend on the long overland trail with its dry camps and storm threats.

A week before Lucas had ridden on to Three Hills. He wanted the thrill of the first run over the newly-laid steel. He also wanted to be on hand if trouble loomed for the train crew en route.

In the engine cab he watched the fireboy at work—a shifty-eyed individual whom instinctively he did not like. But the old hogger, the engineer, was a dyed-in-the-wool throttle puller for whom Lucas had a lot of admiration: "Casey" Mason, they called him, and he chuckled every now and then as he admitted he longed for the moment when again he would meet an old front-end pardner in Sourdough Evans.

But there were times when Casey Mason growled under his breath. On one such occasion he spoke his mind to Lucas.

"Low water's goin' to be our biggest trouble, son," he said gruffly. "If these wideloopin' jaspers yuh told me about want to get shore enough salty, all they got to do is to steal a tank of water on us. I've told the super we should be carryin' a tank car our ownselves, but—well, you know how it is with them fellers in the swivel chairs." Disgustedly Casey sent a stream of tobacco juice sizzling against the firebox door.

WHEN they finished taking water at the last tank before reaching the loading ramps and pens at the end of steel, Casey glanced at the cowboy riding with him, his eyes blazing.

"Hardly a half tenderful, Lucas," he said. "Blazes!"

"But yuh got a downgrade from here on in, Casey," Lucas reminded.

The old hogger snorted. "Uh—son, I've give yuh credit for a lot uh savvy, but great guns and old hickory! Don't yuh understand that comin' back we'll have forty-three loaded cars and an almighty tough grade to hump up?"

At a chuckle at his back, Lucas turned quickly. The flashing dark eyes of the fireboy were trained on him. He felt uncomfortable. Casey pulled his whistle and the locomotive drivers went into action.

They coasted downgrade and in a few hours, Jay Lucas glimpsed old Sourdough Evans strutting up and down a loading platform, puffing out his mustache. Below the platform, excellent stock huddled in the pens, frightened by this snorting monster which bore down on them.

Sourdough flung up both his arms in greeting, and Casey Mason gave his old friend a devil's tattoo on the whistle.

Lucas dropped down to the platform, shook hands with Dunc Lane and other ranchers gathered there. He cast a glance at the water tank wagons and saw that two of the tanks were still full, with water still in the troughs.

Casey Mason now was at work spotting cars. He had old Sourdough Evans in the cab with him. Sourdough took over the throttle a spell.

Hazers lost no time in hazing the cattle up the ramps.

An almost full moon bathed the flatland with plenty of light for loading operations which Jay Lucas watched with keen interest. He had been asked by the ranchers to pick out a crew of men to ride along with the shipment, in case of trouble.

His first selection was old Sourdough Evans. Then he hand-picked men he knew would be ready with a gun if necessary.

He quivered with uncertainty as the conductor gave Casey the highball. The cars were loaded, and eager cowhands boarded the equipment car. Sourdough rode the cab, while Jay perched himself up on the tender, fascinated as he watched the sullen fireboy pour the coal to her.

Every now and then as they rattled along, Jay watched the fireman shake out his fire and then flush the pan below with water as fire prevention. But he still didn't like the man.

CHAPTER V

Teamwork

NOW they were running the dry belt, and from time to time Lucas saw both Casey and Sourdough cast anxious glances at the water glass. Thumbs stuck in his gun-belt, the cowboy watched the fireboy, too, and watched that lingering enigmatic smile of

his which was more a sneer, as if he enjoyed Casey's discomfort.

Lucas stepped down and moved in close to Sourdough.

"Somethin' wrong, Sourdough?" he asked, speaking into the old ex-engineer's ear.

"Uh—well, it don't look too good, Jay boy. Water's slippin' way below our calculations. Heavy grade, this. Casey's plumb worried, and fit to be tied besides."

Casey swung, bellowing at the fireman, who straightened.

"My side's all right, Casey!" the man yelled back.

"Then check the tender!"

The man slid by Lucas and Sourdough, to make a check.

"Seems aplenty," he reported in a moment, but the old hogger shook his head. He called Sourdough to him, and Lucas could not catch what was said.

Within a few more miles he noted a definite slackening of speed. Then Casey exploded as he brought the engine to a groaning stop.

The fireboy was down, making some adjustment to valve cocks on his side, when Casey, roaring, came down from his drive seat.

"What in the blue thunder are yuh doin', feller?" he boomed. "Why, you—"

The fireboy stooped, scooped up his shovel. As Casey lunged for him, he swung his big shovel over in a wide arc. Before either Lucas or Sourdough could take a hand, Casey Mason slumped to a grotesque heap. The fireboy hurtled out to the grade as Jay Lucas ripped a couple of shots from his gun.

"You tend to Casey!" the cowboy yelled as he sprang from the cab. "I'm afraid this is it!"

He moved cautiously around the right side of the big locomotive. Conductor and brakeman, followed by the cowhands, were hurrying forward. When Lucas reached Sam Coleman, Nevada's partner, he issued swift instructions.

"Hug the ditches, and keep a sharp look out. That fireboy knew what he was doin'! This is the lonesomest part of the whole dry belt!"

He whirled and scuttled back toward the front end as a rapid burst of gunfire exploded. The fire came from scattered sagebrush clumps, which told that the raider gang were dismounted.

Lucas flattened into a ditch and crawled along. He eased himself up the bank, in the cover of a clump of sage. His jaw sagged, eyes widening as he glimpsed a tall man, bent over, easing around a patch of scrub.

"Fairburn!" Lucas muttered grimly, thumbing back the hammer of his gun. He quivered, but he could not shoot his enemy in the back.

But his time had come, the moment of big opportunity. Here was his chance to call Chad Fairburn into an even-odds gunfight. He yelled and Fairburn spun, rolling. He pulled and Jay felt a bullet pluck at his shirt, but to slightly nick his old scar tissue.

Crouched, heart beating heavily, he watched for the slightest sign of movement in the scrub. Then Fairburn tried the old trick of decoying him with his hat on a stick. Lucas grinned. Well balanced, he slowly moved his gun, carefully calculating distance, then suddenly he yelled and pulled, triggering swiftly as he leaped to one side.

Shots *thupped* hard into the side of the engine. A second man appeared, a threat to the cowboy, but from Lucas' back an old .44 single-action barked, and the man pitched to his face.

Sourdough Evans could still handle a Colt!

Suddenly, in desperation, Fairburn leaped from cover and threw down, but Lucas was as swift as a rattler. He jerked his Colt muzzle up an inch or so and pulled, twice. A throaty rattle sounded from Fairburn, who pitched heavily forward to lie still.

Sporadic gunfire came from along the right-of-way as Lucas returned to the cab. Sourdough was alone. The con and train crew had carried Casey back to the spare car for attention. He was badly wounded.

SOURDOUGH was busy drawing his his fire.

"Burn out the b'iler if I don't draw, son," Evans said hoarsely. "Danged crooked fireboy has all the time been stealin' water, flushing it out through the pan below. Hose bag between engine and tender was cut, too. Dead b'iler and no water. Hallelujah!"

Sourdough was still sounding off as Jay went flying out the left side of the cab to lend a hand to his men. He heard the drum of hoofbeats. Such members of the raider crew as were able to ride were running for it, leaving their dead and wounded in the sagebrush. . . .

The moon shone down on the circle of cowhands and train crew as they sat eating a midnight snack.

"Ain't there any way we can get movin', Sourdough?" Lucas asked, and flushed as the conductor snorted.

"They's only one way yuh can move a dead engine, son," Sourdough replied miserably, "and that's with fire and water and steam. Even if I had water, I'd have the devil of a time gettin' it into the bi'ler without steam for the injector pumps."

"Sourdough!" Jay Lucas' voice was sharp, and old Sourdough looked at him sharply.

"Yeah, what?" he said gruffly.

"Nothin'. Leastwise it was only kind-of an idea. But—I was thinkin' of them two tank wagons of water back at the loadin' sidin'. Would they—"

Old Sourdough Evans scrambled to his feet. His cheeks were puffed out as he strutted back and forth. Suddenly he swung on the cowboy.

"Have a couple of yore boys ride off and tote in them wagons, son," he said. "There's loose broncs around—wide-loopers' hosses. Fetch in the danged water and I'll find some way uh gettin' it into the bi'ler."

A chuckle from the conductor cut him off.

"How in thunder can you or anybody else get water into a boiler without interceptor help, old timer?" the con asked.

Old Sourdough turned his glance back to Jay.

"Do like I said, Jay, boy," he said. "Mebbe this con ain't remembered we got a whistle on this locomotive—a tube down on into the b'iler. Sounds crazy, but it's been done before."

The conductor got to his feet, his eyes popping.

"Why, I'll be a horn toad's uncle!" he gasped. "Yuh're either loco or else. . . . Say, why not see if Casey's awake in the spare car. He'd mebbe help yuh decide."

As Lucas dispatched two riders to the siding, old Sourdough moved to the car where Casey, with other wounded, lay on hay. Casey stirred at Sourdough's voice. Jay Lucas poked his head in the car opening and listened. His heart began to pick up tempo, for weakly Casey confirmed Sourdough's idea to get water to the boiler by screwing off the whistle and funneling it on through the tube. . . .

Sunset of the second day following the raid splashed the drear dry belt. Thirsty cattle bawled in their cars. Old Sourdough, upon the gangway, grumbled for there was still no sign of the tank wagons.

Now and then he turned to blink down at Lucas to whom he gave all the credit for having beaten off the wideloopers of Fairburn's outfit. He also was crediting the cowboy with the idea to bring in the water wagons, though he still had his doubts about getting sufficient water into the boiler by the crude method he intended to try.

A wild whoop from the brakeman brought both Sourdough and Lucas spinning around. From the west, there came the unmistakable rumble of wagon wheels.

Within an hour, helped by a bucket brigade on the first of the bank wagons, Sourdough was slowly feeding water down through the whistle tube route. It was working, however slowly. The conductor, with the brakeman's help, had patched up the cut hose bag between engine and tender.

An age seemed to drag by before Sourdough stepped in to check his water glass. He was puffing excitedly as he called on Lucas to build a fire.

"She'll take her, son!" he called. "You're fireboy from now on."

LUCAS got help and soon had a fire built. He grinned as he swung the bar, opening the door to scoop in coal. Sourdough munched his tobacco steadily as he watched. He checked his injector valves, and took a general look around.

Shortly steam hissed from a cock, as Sourdough tested. Then he yelled to a teamster to draw up alongside the tender. He was going to start syphoning water from the tank, hoping his pumps would work.

By midnight, Sourdough nudged Jay Lucas in the ribs sector, chuckling.

"Half an hour, son, an' we'll have a head of steam, I wish I was back in the spare

car to hear old Casey explode when I rap her."

Lucas grinned, and turned to bend his back and scoop in more coal.

Sourdough called to the con.

"Get 'em aboard, mister! I'm goin' to move her!"

Cowhands jostled one another as they hustled back to their car. Sourdough pulled his whistle wide and the blast penetrated far across the open dry belt in defiance. The old-timer tipped back his hat, spat testily, then eased back on his throttle.

"Hump yore back, son, and get plenty into her! We're goin' to rap her!"

Despite his weariness, Lucas chuckled as he poured the coal into that hungry orange-red maw of many tongues.

Cars bucked and jerked before Sourdough could get the feel of everything, then they were stretching, rolling, and the rattle of wheels and the snorts of the engine drowned out the sounds of bawling cattle and Casey Mason's bellows. . . .

Two days later, garbed in a complete new rig, Jay Lucas strode into a Three Hills Junction saloon. He grinned as he waved to a group of men at a table. There were old Sourdough Evans and Casey Mason, Sam Coleman and others.

Lucas strode up to the barkeep and flipped a gold coin onto the bar.

"Keep 'em loaded as far as that'll go, mister," he said, grinning. "I'll have a short one myownself."

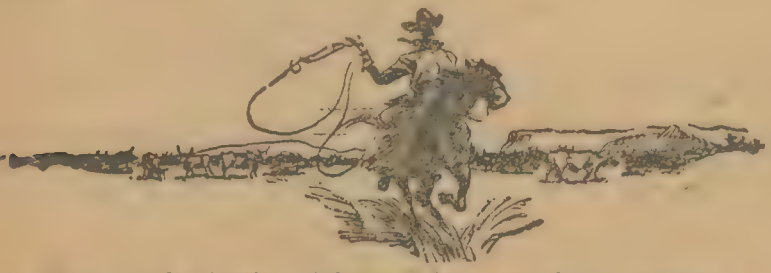
HE GULPED his drink, and moved back, pausing at the table as Sourdough beckoned to him.

"Can't stop, boys," he said. "I—uh—got heavy bankin' business. But I'll be along later to ride herd on yuh, and get yuh to bed. Yuh'll be up at dawn. We're deadheadin' back to Evans' Sidin'."

"Uh—what was that yuh said, pardner?" old Sourdough asked. "Yuh said we was goin' to—uh—Evans' Sidin'?"

"Yeah, that's right, Sourdough. Name'll be on all the railroad maps soon. Super's idea of a tribute to an old hogger who brought us through hell and low water. *Sabe?*"

Old Sourdough's one eye filmed over with moisture. Lucas' own eyes were sort of moist, too, as he hit the sunlight, but he chuckled softly, and headed for the bank.



How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

HERE'S another test of yore Western knowledge, hombres an' hombresses. These five questions count about 20% each an' if yuh get a score of 60% or over yuh kin consider yourself a tophand. So throw yore loop and see how many yuh kin rope. The answers are all neatly corraled for you on Page 106, but don't look unless you must.

1. Who killed the killer of Billy the Kid?
2. What is the origin of the word **Texas?**
3. In the following lines of a well-known cowboy ballad—"As I walked out in the streets of Laredo, as I walked out in Laredo one day, I spied a cowpuncher all wrapped in white linen . . ." what was the cowboy doing?
4. Iowa is known as The Hawkeye State. Can you supply the corresponding term for two out of three of the following: (1) Utah, (2) Texas, (3) Oklahoma?
5. What is a "muley"?

"Keep out of this Sheriff!" Clark ordered from the floor

GUNLESS WONDER

By JACKSON COLE

BOB CLARK swung out of the saddle and tied the sorrel's reins to the hitching rail in front of the Glad Hand Saloon. For a few moments the big blond young rancher in white shirt, worn levis and scuffed cowboy boots, just stood there on the plank walk like a man will when he has something on his mind and hasn't decided quite what to do about it.

Behind him the swinging doors of the saloon creaked open. He glanced over his shoulder, then turned around and silently watched the two men who had stepped out.

"The Gunless Wonder," Brad Dawson said, noticing that Clark did not have a gunbelt. "Maybe his Indian name is 'Man-Afraid-Of-A-Forty-five.'"

Lem Harper laughed; he figured it was what his boss expected him to do. Dawson, middle-aged, of medium height, owned the Diamond D spread five miles south of Clark's Box C, and he considered himself a right tough hombre. He usually wort batwing leather chaps with his range

Matt Gleason turns the tables on cattle-rustling gunslicks!

clothes and carried two guns in his holsters.

Harper was a hard-faced man who also wore two guns, and his work on the Diamond D apparently consisted of acting as bodyguard for his boss. Wherever Dawson went Harper was always with him. Ever since Bob Clark had bought old Zack Hill's ranch a year ago after the owner died Dawson had been making trouble for him.

"That's it," said Dawson, when he found that Clark apparently did not intend to say anything. "The Gunless Wonder."

"You sort of remind me of a brook I seen one time, Dawson," Clark said casually, moving closer to the two men. "It just kept on babbling day and night and never did say anything important."

Since Dawson considered himself a man of few words, and all of them important, he felt he had been insulted. He snarled and reached for his right-hand gun. Clark smashed a hard right to Dawson's chin and knocked him to the plank walk before the owner of the Diamond D could draw. A powerful left connected with Harper and he also went down.

"Feelin' yore oats or somethin' this mornin', Clark?" demanded a deep voice.

Clark glanced in the direction of the voice and saw Sheriff Matt Gleason standing just outside the swinging doors of the Glad Hand. The lawman was a big, dark haired man with a mustache. He took no fooling from anyone.

"Just a little argument, Sheriff," Clark said.

"I know." The sheriff nodded. "I seen and heard the whole thing. Looks like Dawson figgers it's plumb insultin' to be called a babblin' brook."

On the plank walk Dawson was still out cold from Clark's blow, but Harper recovered and grabbed for one of his guns. Clark wasn't watching the gunman. Gleason's hand flashed to his holster, a .45 roared as it came up and Harper's gun went flying out into the dust of the street as a bullet hit it.

"Thanks, Sheriff," Clark said dryly as he realized what had happened. "That's the trouble with wearin' guns; folks like Harper get too impulsive about usin' them."

Harper scrambled to his feet and Dawson moaned and sat up. The sheriff dropped his gun back into the holster.

"Don't ever try anything like that again, Harper," the sheriff said. "I don't like hombres who try to back-shoot an unarmed man."

"Aw, I was still dazed from Clark hittin' me and didn't know what I was doin', Sheriff," Harper said. "I wasn't really goin' to shoot Clark."

"What happened?" Dawson stood up and looked around him dazedly. "Where's the mule?"

"What mule?" the sheriff asked.

"The one that kicked me and knocked me unconscious," said Dawson.

"Oh." Gleason smiled and glanced at Clark who was grinning. "It wasn't a mule that kicked yuh, Dawson. Clark just hit yuh lightly and yuh fell down."

"I need a drink," Dawson said suddenly and headed inside the saloon.

"Me, too," echoed Harper as he quickly followed his boss in through the swinging doors.

"Ain't you ashamed of yoreself, Clark?" said the sheriff. "Makin' a couple of gents unhappy that way. Why yuh've spoiled the whole mornin' for them."

"And it's just breakin' my heart," said Clark.

WHEN the sheriff started down the street toward his office, Clark walked with him. There were things that the owner of the Box C figured he had better report to the law.

"Somethin' on yore mind?" Gleason asked.

"There's a couple of things. I been losin' stock lately. Just a few head at a time, but with a small herd like I've got, it is right easy to spot. I heard that Dawson was figgerin' on buyin' Hill's ranch before I bought it."

"He was," said Sheriff Gleason. "But the lawyer who handled Zack Hill's affairs after Hill died figgered Dawson wasn't offerin' enough for the spread. You were willin' to pay the askin' price so you got it." Gleason frowned and glanced at the younger man as they reached the door of the office. "How did you happen to be so rich?"

"By savin' my money," Clark told him simply.

His mind drifted back to the five years of hectic living that had been his before

he had come to this part of Texas and decided to buy a ranch and settle down to raising cattle. He was born on a ranch, but had drifted away when he was fifteen —the usual fiddle-footed youngster anxious to see what was on the other side of the hills.

He had worked on various spreads and learned to be a good cowhand. Then five years ago he had taken a job as an Overland stage guard. Two years of that had been enough—years during which he had so often been forced to use his guns. Then three more years as a sheriff's deputy, and always with the guns such a vital part of his life.

When he bought Zack Hill's ranch he decided that he was through with powder-smoke and had put his guns away. He had never worn them in this part of the country, and it was because of this that Dawson had called him the Gunless Wonder. Dawson didn't know that Bob Clark was a fast and dangerous man with a .45.

"Yuh think Dawson is rustlin' yore stock and tryin' to drive you away?" the sheriff asked as they went into his office. "Is that it?"

"He wants to drive me away, all right," answered Clark. "But I ain't certain he is doin' the rustlin'. Maybe he has been losin' stock, too."

"That's right—he has." Gleason nodded. "At least so he tells me."

"But there's no way of provin' it unless yuh knew Dawson's stock right well," said Clark. "That it?"

"Right," the sheriff agreed. "But no other ranches have reported any losses around here."

Footsteps were heard on the plank walk outside, and they stopped talking as Brad Dawson and Lem Harper stepped into the office. Harper swayed a little as though he had had too much to drink. Dawson was scowling.

"We came into town this mornin' for just one reason, Sheriff," Dawson said. "And that was to demand that you arrest Bob Clark for stealin' Diamond D cattle."

"That's right," said Harper a bit thickly. "He's been stealin' our stock."

"You're lyin'!" snapped Clark as he leaped to his feet. "I haven't stolen any cattle." He snatched a Colt out of Dawson's left holster, when he saw Harper reaching for his guns. Then he backed away covering the two men. "Don't try anything foolish," he warned them.

There was a silly expression on Harper's face as he drew his fingers away from his holsters. "Looks like he's got us, boss," he said. "He'll never let us show the sheriff them hides with the blotted brands we left on his spread now—" He broke off with a frightened expression as he saw the look of rage on Dawson's face.

"So yuh're the rustler, Lem!" Dawson shouted. "And I never even suspected yuh might be stealin' my stock and Clark's critters."

Clark stepped forward, but his foot caught in a crack in the floor and he went down hard. Harper drew his right hand gun simultaneously with his boss. He fired at Dawson and missed. Dawson's gun roared and a bullet plowed into Harper's chest. From the floor Clark covered Gleason with his gun.

"Keep out of this, Sheriff!" the young rancher ordered.

Harper staggered back. He looked at Dawson and then at Clark. "Talked too much," he muttered. "Never thought they'd catch us—Bob. He—"

The words died away as the gunman pitched forward on his face and sprawled there motionless. Dawson was standing over the owner of the Box C and he brought his gun barrel down on his head with such force that Clark was stunned. His gun dropped out of his hand, but he was not unconscious.

DAWSON grabbed up Clark's gun and handed it to the sheriff. "There's yore rustlers, Sheriff," he said. "Didn't aim to kill Harper, but it was his life or mine. Never even thought of him and Clark workin' together and stealin' the stock. But from what Harper said as he went down, that's shore it."

"Sounds that way," said the sheriff slowly. "But what about those blotted brands on the Box C that Harper mentioned?"

"I don't know anythin' about them," said Dawson quickly as he holstered his guns. "Looks like Harper suddenly realized he and Clark were in a tight and was tryin' to frame me."

"Afraid I'll have to place yuh under arrest until we get this cleared up, Clark."

the sheriff said, pulling out a pair of handcuffs. "I'm lockin' yuh up right now."

"Yuh're all wrong, Sheriff," Clark insisted. "I wasn't workin' with Harper."

"Then why did yuh cover me with that gun and tell me to keep out of it?" demanded Sheriff Gleason.

Clark's reason—because he was sure that if the lawman drew, either Harper or Dawson would shoot him—seemed a silly one now so he didn't bother to try and explain.

"No reason except to protect Harper, eh?" Gleason asked Clark when Clark did not speak. "Yuh figgered he would down Dawson with the first shot he fired." He snapped one of the steel cuffs on his own wrist and the other on Clark's. "All right, youngster. Head out back to the jail."

Dawson remained in the office as they went through a corridor that led to the jail. There were no windows in the corridor and even in daylight an oil lamp was constantly in use. As they came to a door with iron bars in the upper part of it the sheriff unlocked the cuff from Clark's wrist. Then he whispered something to the Box C owner and Clark nodded.

"Yuh'll never lock me up!" Clark shouted loudly, and he grabbed the sheriff's arms, one still dangling handcuffs, the other with drawn gun.

"Look out, Sheriff," yelled Dawson, as he appeared, gun in hand. "I'll get him."

The gun in the sheriff's hand roared and Dawson howled as a bullet went through his gun arm. Clark laughed and quickly released his grip on the lawman.

"You were right, Sheriff," he said. "Dawson was just waitin' for a chance to down me like he did Harper. You were smart in tellin' me to pretend I was tryin' to escape. He fell for that right off."

"Of course I was tryin' to down him to protect you, Sheriff," said Dawson, holding his wounded right arm. "He's been doing the rustlin', workin' with Harper, just as I said."

"No, he hasn't," said a weak voice behind Dawson.

Lem Harper stood there covering the owner of the Diamond D with a gun. Dawson shook with terror as he gazed wildly at the man he had been sure he killed.

"But—but yuh're dead!" Dawson stammered. "I shot and killed yuh, Lem!"

"You shot me all right," Harper said. "And I got a bad shoulder wound. But just because a man drops to the floor, that ain't no sign he is dead. All three of yuh were dumb about that—yuh didn't examine the corpse." The gunman glared at Dawson. "You paid me well for stealin' stock from the Box C and lyin' about us losin' stock, too, so you would get Clark's ranch. But I didn't know yuh'd try to kill me to keep me from talkin' when it came to a showdown, Dawson."

Dawson went for his left hand gun, but before he could shoot, Clark hit him again with a hard right to the chin—and the owner of the Diamond D dropped to the floor.

"Good thing yuh done that," said Harper. "If he had drawn his gun I'd shore killed him."

"Looks like the Law got the rustlers," said the sheriff, grinning at Clark. "With the help of the Gunless Wonder!"

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The Professor Takes a Hand

The leveled .45 in the hands of the outlaw leader checked the Professor

By COSMO BENNETT

Jefferson Mantle's education is his weapon when he faces an outlaw gang

THE rose pink flush in the sky to his left informed the "Professor" that he was headed south. This was the instinctive direction of a fugitive.

The chill of a new dawn partly cleared his throbbing brain, but also showered him with unanswered questions. Such as the horse he was riding, and riding hard, according to the foam-lathered neck. It wasn't his. He did not own a horse.

And at the thought his right hand went quickly to his neck as though to relieve a choking sensation. The Professor remembered the temper of Canyon City over recent outrages. He looked backward apprehensively.

Sometimes Jefferson Mantle resented the appellation of "Professor." It suggested a graybeard much older than his clean-shaven thirty-five years, or a man less virile than his lean but wiry physique indicated.

But the title had been rightfully earned. Back East a combination of strong drink and cards "had set a bad example" in several institutions of learning. The last dismissal had been followed by a binge that left him dented in health. So he had come West both to improve his health and to regain his self-respect.

So far he had done neither. Mantle looked at his tired mount again. Last night's liquid consumption, both as to quantity and quality, must have been potent.

He suddenly became aware of an excessive bulge and weight in his pockets.

He pulled out paper money, silver dollars and gold pieces. His drooping lantern jaw showed anything but elation.

He could vaguely recreate—or maybe imagine—those hours the night before in that smoke-fogged, reeking saloon. He had befuddled his fellow players with his erudition. He had undoubtedly given dissertations on Descartes, Spinoza and Voltaire. He would have boasted of his academic laurels, of his degrees—Bachelor of Science, Master of Arts, and Doctor of Philosophy.

And meanwhile he would have done things with the cards. Never when sober would he have used his acquired skill with the pasteboards and his long deft fingers for pecuniary advantage. But he had not been sober last night. He had been drunk.

SOMEONE'S suspicions must have been aroused to cause this hurried departure for points south. Of course it might have been his conscience. Perhaps the sight of those many "Wanted" signs. There was no price on his head. But a fogged brain could substitute his own gaunt visage for those on the posters.

Again Mantle looked back apprehensively. The expanding daylight ripped from him the protecting cover of the night and left him exposed to his conscience and to whomever might have taken the trail to hunt him down.

He looked upon the expanding canyon and saw it bisected by cross ravines so that from the eyes of a soaring vulture the whole must look like a giant skeleton with bleaching spinal column and ribs.

Mantle drove his lathered mount at greater speed. The clarion echoing of the hoof beats upon the stone-strewn canyon seemed to publicize his flight.

But these were not echoes.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw them in hot pursuit. There were only six. But even if he had been armed he knew he stood no chance against a posse of even six.

He heard the zing of a bullet past his ear before he heard the shot itself. Mantle closed his eyes. This was the end. He didn't mind death so much as the manner of his passing. Strung up by a rope. He, a college graduate. A professor. Gone was any chance of doing at least one act that might redeem his self-respect.

With faster, fresher horses they overtook him swiftly. Mantle pulled up. At least he would refuse to cringe, refuse to beg for his life.

He thought he recognized the leader. That scar on the left cheek that gave one eye a piratical leer could hardly be forgotten. Perhaps he had been in the poker game. And there was another—a sallow, rodent-featured individual. Mantle definitely remembered him as being in the saloon. Not playing poker, but standing by.

And suddenly he recalled the other face. It was the one on the posters.

There was a five-thousand-dollar reward for this Bart Haskell alone. And five hundred for each of his gang. At least one sheriff and a number of deputies had been slain trying to collect. Mantle wondered how heinous his own crimes could have been to warrant Haskell using him to make a deal.

"You come with us," directed Haskell gruffly.

He yanked Mantle's mount around and gave it a short kick in the flank.

Mantle was not surprised at heading back over the trail. He *was* surprised when the party swung off a side ravine. But on second thought he told himself that Haskell could hardly approach a law-abiding community except by a devious route.

Mantle did not see the cabin until they were upon it. And then, because of its disreputable appearance, he gave it little thought. He did casually note a construction defect. The top of the flue from which came a wisp of heavy, smudgy smoke was lower than the roof, and poor for a draught.

His brows went up slightly when the riders came to a halt. A hideout, he decided. Maybe this explained why they endured a bad draught and used soft coal that gave off a low, heavy smoke and settled quickly.

Haskell shoved Mantle inside the disorderly cabin. Partly open windows failed to relieve the foul air of the place. Mantle heard groaning from a cot.

Haskell thrust the business end of a .45 into Mantle's ribs. Then used it to point first to the cot and back to Mantle.

"Aw-right, Doc. Make him better. He die—you die."

Mantle's surprised protests showed on his face before he could put them into words. The rodent-faced man whom Mantle had remembered from last night's poker game stepped up.

"We know you, Doctor," he growled. "You talk plenty last night."

Mantle opened his mouth, then closed it again. What sense was there in explaining to this motley gang that he was merely a doctor of philosophy? To them a "doctor" was a physician. Besides, no telling of what powers his alcoholic brain had boasted.

"Shot," explained Haskell grudgingly. "Got bullet in his chest. Get it out."

With what, Mantle felt like demanding. Even a surgeon needed instruments. Perhaps a sharp knife might do.

Mantle crossed to the cot in the corner where the groaning man lay in a tangle of blankets that were little more than rags. One glance and the general medical knowledge of an educated man was sufficient to tell him that he was looking at a tetanus case in its final stages, caused by infection from a gunshot wound.

MANTLE turned away from the cot. Words formed on his lips.

"It is too late. I can't save him now."

But the levelled .45 in the hands of the outlaw leader checked him. At least he would have to pretend. He rolled up his sleeves. If he could quiet the man it might help. He turned again.

"I'll need whisky. Plenty of it."

"We got it," grunted Haskell. He half turned to one of his men. "Pedro," he snarled. "Whisky. *Mucho.* Pronto."

Mantle crossed to the stove to heat some water. The foul odor due to the faulty draft drove him back. Mantle blinked. So far he had no coherent thought but to stall for time.

He fooled with the fire and then crossed to the cot again. Pedro came in with an armful of bottles. The loot of some saloon. Mantle took the bottles and started passing them out.

Haskell came off the chair. "What you do?"

"You've been with this man some time," Mantle said. "Two, three days."

He looked at the widening dark eyes. Most of these outlaws came from below the Border. They would have knowledge of the dread disease.

"Leprosy," said Mantle.

There followed cries of dismay. Then several broke for the door.

"Stop them!" cried Mantle.

This quick command of Mantle's killed suspicion on the part of the outlaw leader that Mantle had invented the disease, to scare them away.

Haskell barked an order and emphasized it with a shot through a window. Mantle followed up his advantage.

"It is too late to run away. Maybe I can sweat it out of you. Drink plenty of whisky. Get blankets. Keep near the fire."

Forgotten now was the plight of the dying bandit. Blankets were ripped from him. Outlaws huddled about the fire and gulped whisky as though it were water. Mantle closed the windows, noisily, so as to make no effort to conceal what he was doing. But one window he left open a crack—and some time later Mantle moved closer to this window. . . .

It was a strange cavalcade that trooped into Canyon City. Six men roped like sacks of oats over the backs of mounts and one man herding them. Saloons were emptied as Mantle halted before the office of the sheriff.

"You'll find another one of Haskell's men dead back in a cabin," Mantle informed the wondering sheriff as he rushed out of his office and stared at what was being presented to him.

"It's a question," added Mantle, "which killed him first. Blood poisoning from a gunshot wound, or carbon monoxide—coal gas to you—from a defective stove. Anyway, the latter sure knocked out this collection of rats."

The sheriff rubbed his stubbled chin. "I suppose you know you've won yourself a handsome sum of money."

Jefferson Mantle glanced toward the East.

"I've won myself more than that, Sheriff. I've won the right to look a man square in the eye."

As the stage drew close to the fire, Ray saw a man lying on the ground

THE HAUNTED STAGE

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON

Trouble shooter Vern Ray heads for a showdown when he investigates the puzzle of the deserting stage drivers!

VERN RAY got off the late afternoon stage with his grip. He came to Pioche riding one for the outfit he worked for, the Nevada Western Stage Company. He went first to the side stairs to the second floor of the building in which the district office was located. There he took a room, washed his face and dusted himself off.

A few minutes after the hurry of stage arrival quieted he sat in the office across the desk from the section manager, "Doc" Wiggins. There hadn't been any trouble on this division for over a year. Not until now, and that didn't appear to be much. But Ray knew he could never tell, for conservative Doc had been wary in his reports to the

home office requesting a trouble-shooter; Vern Ray if possible.

"The plain truth is I don't know what's goin' on," Doc admitted. His speckled face screwed into a scowl of worry. "The night run north across the Salt Desert to Towser takes ten hours. Made at night on account of the bad heat. Easy, comfortable run, yet I have the dernedest time keeping a man on it!"

Ray grinned wryly. "Tell me."

There wasn't much. A month ago the regular driver handling the run for upwards of a year, came off the return run and quit. He'd looked sheepish about it, too. Doc only supposed he'd gotten tired of being so long on a monotonous job. The second driver lasted a week. He took a transfer elsewhere. The third didn't even bother about coming back from Towser. He simply disappeared, and now the fourth driver had come in, demanding his pay. Doc asked this one how come. Instead of a direct reply the driver considered, frowning deeply. Finally he shrugged his shoulders.

"Yuh wouldn't believe it," he replied. "The fact is that's a spooked run." He refused to say more and, finally, Wiggins had let the driver go, his curiosity unsatisfied.

"There ain't no guard along on this night trip is there?" Vern Ray asked.

"No, no need. No valuables goes on it. Not many passengers either."

"Maybe them drivers just get lonesome," Ray suggested.

Doc swung around in his chair, his gray head shaking a flat denial.

"Some of them talked to close friends before they left town," he said. "They claimed funny things happened on some of their trips. Passengers disappeared into thin air. Balls of fire dashing around the road. Rumors are circulatin' that the stage is ha'nted!"

Ray grinned again. From what Doc said there just didn't seem to be any reason for mysterious happenings. The route was, as he explained a "stub-run." Towser was a small town across the bitter heat of the Salt Desert. No valuables going there meant no guard necessary. The stage went north on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, returning south behind a fresh set of teams the following nights.

"I'll get into my overalls and take the next trip myself," Ray decided.

DOC WIGGINS looked relieved. Ray was known as the best trouble shooter the company employed, though his main occupation was chasing down bandits who infrequently preyed on shipments of express on the stages of other sections of the line.

Ray did take out the next stage, leaving Pioche at eight o'clock at night. The stage carried a few sacks of mail, and three miners as passengers. Ray made the four miles north through the timber, cut onto the switchback down the rim into the Salt Desert. Crossing over he arrived in Towser at six o'clock in the morning.

In the small town a stone building of four rooms was going up on a corner. That night when he came to the station with the stage for the return, he asked about it.

"We're going to have a bank," a sidewalk booster informed him. "Yes, Towser is gettin' right prosperous. Soon we'll be bigger than Pioche!"

The return was as uneventful as the trip up. At the end of the week Ray wore an extremely annoyed look. Nothing whatever had occurred, no strange goings-on, nothing to have intimidated or "spooked" a driver.

Doc said he couldn't understand it either. But Ray's mild blue eyes observed his unspoken attitude of "let's wait and see."

That night, Friday, he left Pioche behind three half broken teams. His passengers were two cowboys, somewhat drunk, though manageable. As soon as they hit the coach, each took a seat, stretched out and went to sleep.

The teams took their run and settled down to steady traveling. Near the timber line approaching the switchback, a dull light showed up ahead. It materialized into a fire beside the road. As the stage drew closer to the fire, Ray saw the man lying on the ground and another man striding toward the road.

The starlight was fairly good. He looked down at the armed man beside the rutted trail, the dark looking clothing and the three-day-old beard on this hard character's face.

"I'm Deputy Sheriff Bell," the man said immediately. "Been workin' a rustlin' case east of here. We had a little run-in, an' my partner's wounded. Made it here knowin' the stage went to Towser tonight. Yuh can take him in?"

"Certainly." Ray's first misgivings, and his hopes this would be one of the spooky happenings dissolved. Braking solid and tying fast, he jumped down to go over to the man on the ground. Most of his face, his neck and left shoulder was wrapped in dirty, dark stained rags, the left arm being in a sling.

He stirred as Ray came up with his companion. Helped to his feet, he permitted them to aid him across to the door of the stage. Ray opening it, tried to awaken one of the cowboys. In disgust he gathered up the slack body and deposited him on the floor of the coach. The bandaged man was then placed on the seat and made comfortable as possible under the circumstances.

"If yuh want anything before we get to Towser, sing out," Ray told him.

He climbed back on the box and gathered up the driving lines. The other man stood motionless beside the road when Ray glanced down at him.

"The sheriff will pay the fare," said the man.

"That's all right," Ray replied.

He threw off the brake, drove on, swung into the switchback, and then down the incline of the rim toward the desert. After the timber line receded, hot dusty air of the desert rose up in waves. But it was cooling, nothing like the intensity of daytime.

The Salt Desert, a weird place of heat, sand and rocks, made outlaw activities a bad business in the region, especially from the south. A single watcher on the rim anywhere could spot outlaws easily, long before they could possibly cross the wide open distance to the rising rim on the north. Because of this, outlaws and bandits, when they did make a raid around Pioche, invariably fled southward rather than buck the desert and lawmen certain to pick up their trail at once.

Time drifted by. By midnight the hot air no longer burned against the face. Ray kept on the alert, watching ceaselessly over the open stretches of the desert. Around four o'clock the dark line of the rim to the north materialized.

Dawn approached. His senses were dulled somewhat by then, so that when a streak of flame suddenly shot into the sky, it was there before Ray realized it. A glowing small ball of fire arched up ahead into the sky. It seemed to stretch out and curve down across the road to the east, well off it. A shaft glistened behind the red glow.

THE teams jerked to a frightened stop at the first sight of the startling glow in the night. Ray promptly threw on the brake to watch. On the downward arch he picked out the flame for what it was—an arrow with a ball of inflammable material behind the point. Such a flame arrow as the Indians once used to set the cabins of settlers afire.

This, he began to understand, was one of those spooky happenings which caused previous drivers to declare solemnly to friends the stage was haunted.

Ray turned on the box to give a quick reconnoiter. Nothing untoward appeared anywhere. He drove on doing considerable theorizing. Unfortunately he had not seen the immediate source of the flaming arrow. However the distance it sped through the air told him it had been launched from a very large bow. The hand that pulled it was overly strong.

The sun was well up when he drove into Towser. The station teamster was there to take over. The storekeeper in whose place the office was situated, appeared sleepy eyed.

Dismounting after tossing down the mail pouches and some express, Ray opened the side door of the stage. With the first look he almost leaped back. The wounded man wasn't inside. The two cowboys still slept druggedly where he last saw them. Inside Ray cuffed them awake and got them out.

"What happened to the other passenger we took on at the rim?" he demanded.

"Huh?" One stared at him incredulously. "Didn't know we took on nobody else durin' the trip."

That was the way of it. Neither knew anything about the stop or the passenger. A slow, certain suspicion

dawned on Ray and he became cautious. Hunting up the town marshal he asked him if Sheriff Earl Mann of Pioche kept a deputy at Towser.

"Nope, he's only got one and he stays around Pioche unless they's business for him up here. Which there ain't been for months hand runnin'."

Returning that night to Pioche, Ray looked up the sheriff first thing in the morning.

"My deputy's name is Hammer," Sheriff Mann informed him. "How come yuh to ask?"

Ray told him, relating the circumstances in detail. Long before he got through a very peculiar and sorrowful expression entered Sheriff Mann's crow-feet wrinkled eyes. Ray began to understand then just why the other drivers had been reticent about talking too much of circumstances they couldn't prove. The story did sound silly in the light of day.

"I seem to recollect hearin' another driver mention disappearin' passengers," Sheriff Mann drawled, but kindly. "Wonder if yuh fellers could see better if yuh'd change yore brand of alkali chaser?"

On the walk back to the stage office, Ray remembered that he hadn't seen any saddled horses near the fire on the road. Yet they must have come to the spot by that means. He entered to sit down glumly in Doc Wiggins' office.

"The only similar case I recall was Anton Huckery spookin' stage drivers and guards down to the south," Ray remarked. "Never was any doubt of his scheme, which was to rattle the stage men so his bandits could pick them off unexpectedly."

"What happened to Huckery?" Doc asked.

"Ran him out of them parts after sendin' most of his gang to the pen."

"Uh, huh," Doc said. "I thought first of all myself what was bein' took by spookin' the stages to Towser. Nary a hold-up. Nothin' lost."

Grinning wryly, Ray inclined his head.

"That's what's wrong with this case. Huckery held up them stages. Here there don't seem to be any gain for nobody on the face of it."

Doc went motionless for a moment, his eyes narrowing.

"Meanin'?" he asked softly.

"If somebody ain't gainin' by these shenanigans, why would they go to all the trouble of doin' it?"

"Could Huckery have returned to Nevada?"

"He could have," Ray admitted. "Only, Huckery was never a light brain. If he was pullin' this, he'd have robbed something long before now."

The next trip Ray had three male passengers, and then a girl. She appeared only a few minutes before the stage left, handing over her fare in cash to Doc at the office door. Already on the box, Ray examined her cursorily through the bluish darkness.

SHE was tall, but slender, a black bonnet shielding most of her white face. A gray colored shirtwaist covered her shoulders. Her angle length billowing dress was of slightly darker material. Over all this she wore a loose cream colored linen duster to protect her clothing.

The trip almost followed the old, monotonous routine. Until the stage came within sight of the north rim of the Salt Desert again. A second flaming arrow shot into the sky. This time it was so far west as to be almost beyond view of the stage. The ball of fire made a short, low arch, disappearing in a matter of seconds.

Ray promptly brought the stage coach to a stop. He reconnoitered at length, and especially about the stage. Some of the men called out something and opened the right door. The girl got out, being helped down by one of the male passengers.

"I'll leave here," she spoke rather huskily, her white face turned upward in the moonlight.

"Yuh shore what yuh want to do, ma'am?" Ray asked, puzzled. "Somebody goin' to meet yuh away out here?"

"Yes, sir. I live over here just a little ways."

She stood beside the stage road, waiting politely. Ray studied a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. The vehicle got under way again. Less than a quarter of a mile off he turned to look back. The

girl having crossed the road west, walked along with mannish stride straight out into nowhere. He kept looking back as the stage rolled on, until the girl vanished completely into the predawn darkness.

After handing over his teams to the local employe, Ray forgot sleep until he found the marshal. He was at the new bank building watching the roof going on. The interior was likewise being finished up, ready for occupany.

"Any ranches down there?" the grizzled marshal asked when Ray made his question. He scratched one side of his jaw. "We-ell, seems to me a long time ago some feller did try to make a go of it. All that's left now is an old tumbled down place west of the road not far from the rim. How come yuh're interested?"

"Could be there's people livin' there again," Ray replied. "Might be worth looking into."

He went over to the small company barn and got a saddled horse. Despite his weariness he rode south, meeting the torrid, unmoving air of the desert below the rim. No wonder travelers avoided it during the day time.

Down on the road he located the tracks of his late passenger and followed them west. Ray wouldn't believe that passenger could be other than a man. Of course he wasn't certain, but there had been a free, swinging stride that only a man uses. Not far from the stage road, probably, he had come to the spot a rider waited with another horse. There his passenger obviously had mounted and both had set off on west.

Ray did not continue far. Perhaps his stirring abroad had already been seen, and alarmed them. He didn't want his suspects to flee until he discovered what it was all about. Returning to Towser he put the horse away and slept until dusk.

Having no passengers tonight, he set forth alone with the stage. Approaching the spot where his passenger disembarked the preceding night he observed a lone rider beside the road. Ray scrutinized the man warily as he came up.

He was dressed darkly, was thin-waisted with wide shoulders, and young. He sat his saddle almost over the tracks of the strange passenger, nor did he move as the stage rolled up in a cloud of dust, and went past him.

When Ray looked back, the rider moved westward at an easy trot. Midnight was at hand when Ray encountered a second rider. This one came along north on the road. He moved off to one side, without slowing down when the stage got near. Ray turned his head to look at him, and froze to his seat.

This rider even to the blaze on the head of his dark red gelding looked exactly like the rider Ray had encountered slightly more than three hours before! Ray blinked his eyes, and turned on the seat. Through the dust of the desert pulled up by the wheels, the rider was coming on steadily along the road.

"If I was the spooky kind, I sure wouldn't like that," Ray muttered gloomily. "Not meetin' the same rider twice on the same road miles apart!"

PIOCHE was coming wide awake when he got in. Ray delivered his freight, handed his outfit over and went in search of Sheriff Mann. He found him with his round-middled deputy mounting a horse before the office.

"Ain't got time to talk now," Sheriff Mann told Ray quickly. "Them highgraders are workin' again at the Takapaw diggin's an' we got to go try catchin' them. See yuh when I get back!"

Ray turned to watch them go, feeling out of sorts. The Takapaw mining company was a placer outfit on Piute creek west of town. He remembered that, and the highgrading business hit him all at the same time.

"Hey, wait a minute!" he yelled suddenly, but Sheriff Mann and his companion galloped unheedingly down the main street, and out of town.

Walking hurriedly as his enthusiasm for a new theory increased, Ray reached the stage company office. Inside the front room he found Doc Wiggins sitting tensed behind his desk. Doc glanced up without a change of expression.

"Why haven't I heard about them highgraders before this?" Ray began. "It's all beginnin' to make sense finally!"

"What?" Doc asked, surprisingly stingy with words.

"Why, them highgraders! In an outfit

like that, there's usually an inside gang. They take the biggest hunks of gold out of the clean-up and the tailin's. They got to get rid of it fast to keep from gettin' caught so as to make more than two hauls. So, they have an outside gang. The stuff is delivered to them. The outside men cache it for the divvy-up in a safe place. Sure as yuh're born, Doc, that stage north is part of their plan. Likely delivery, us haulin' it unbeknown. and that queer passenger they get aboard is takin' it off!"

"And the law, when called in, can't find no gold on the suspected highgraders," Doc admitted dryly. "We don't need to worry about them even if yore idea should happen to be good. Me, I don't take no stock in it. I got another answer to all them shenanigans of spookin' the stage driver."

"Yeah?" Ray went cold, now noticing that Doc was very grim, and badly worried.

"We got in the back room under guard an iron box full of currency and coin, headed for the new bank that's openin' in Towser. Come in on the mornin' stage from the railroad."

Ray grew tense, and finally emitted a whistle.

"Seems like Anton Huckery playin' cards with us after all," Doc ground out tonelessly.

The stage spooking began to make sense, he opined sadly. Huckery, or whoever the bandits were after the shipment of money, in his estimation had advance information it would be made. That meant an inside job. Plans had been laid and now the robbery was all set to come off.

"This series of stunts on the stage began nearly two months ago," Ray objected, though not too strongly.

"Because they didn't actually know the time of shipment," Doc answered gloomily. "The shippin' time depended on the completion of the buildin' and installin' the strong-box up there. Them bandits didn't go around takin' no chances. They went to work the safe way. They've had so much time perfectin' their plans I reckon they'll attack, kill everybody in sight, and be gone in a matter of ten minutes."

Ray rubbed the dimpled point of his chin reflectively.

"It's now yore baby," Doc informed him. "I've always heard these kind of schemes was yore meat. What yuh want done right away?"

Ray was remembering that if this was the long range plan of bandits, then a man on top of the stage might wake up in another world without hearing the blast of gunfire that sent him there. Dangerous! Yet, this was his job.

"Take no passengers for the run tonight," Ray replied, becoming all business. "Get me four company men, two with shot-guns. Have the metal box loaded inside the stage with them before it comes up before the office tonight. I'll drive it through!"

Doc came up concerned. How about a guard on the driver's box, didn't he realize what would likely happen? Ray shook his head. He also decided against another broached plan, of sending the money through in the daytime with guards riding all around it.

"We'd be forced to send relays of teams into the desert," he reminded. "It ain't my idea to kill off good horses when this other way maybe is as good."

Now that the mysterious business seemed to have come to a head, Ray no longer worried about what might be going on. Prospect of action always calmed him down. He simply went to his room for sleep and rest, arose at nightfall and ate.

HE DIDN'T show up at the office until just before stage time. No unusual excitement around there, nor many men. Doc, though, was white-faced and bowed down with worry all day long.

"Yuh're goin' to hit it right in the middle," he whispered. "Huckery used these same methods before, and he aims for them to pay off once again."

"We'll see."

Climbing to the box, Ray noted the top contained freight as usual. Relieving the barn teamster he turned his teams out of the main street into the north road. He kept on going, knowing his guards were on watch under him.

In the heaviest stand of timber, however, he grew edgy with constant reconnoitering. This spot offered advantageous concealment for sudden and bloody

onslaught. But it didn't come.

The switch-back came into sight. Ray turned into it, rolling along the descent with protesting brake blocks. At the bottom the teams stretched against their collars for the comparatively empty spaces on north. Here reposed in the starlight the least likely terrain for a robbery. Yet it could be the opposite.

When Ray saw an old desert prospector standing beside the road, he gaped in sheer astonishment, instantly shooting his gaze suspiciously over the immediate surroundings. Only empty flats devoid even of standing cactus or black boulders could be seen.

The prospector, Ray observed, would have been much taller had he lifted his bowed shoulders. Through a bristly gray beard was stuck a dead corn cob pipe. He was dirty, and tobacco stained. A bundle consisting of a blanket and a piece of tattered comforter quilt lay in a roll at his feet. Short of him Ray threw his brake and pulled back on his lines so that the vehicle halted, standing even with the prospector on the east side of the road.

Ray came over the wheel fast toward him. As swiftly as he acted the four guards inside literally poured themselves out. Suspecting a hold-up in the offing, two each took a side, running out from the doors, banged wide open.

"What in tarnation!" the prospector exclaimed faintly.

"Hi, pop," Ray drawled. "Goin' some place?"

"Aimed for to see the lights in Towser," the man answered in a complaining voice.

"Well, let's get on our way," Ray told him. Picking up the rolled bedding he tossed it up on top with the freight.

One of the guards moved near. "Reckon it's all right?" he asked sibilantly. "This old buzzard ain't a lookout or something?"

"In yuh go, pop," Ray said and gave the prospector a boost. The man promptly turned back undecided. He acted as though very much doubtful of riding the stage after all.

"Don't call me pop," he snapped. "I—" and stopped abruptly because Ray's six-gun muzzle met his middle.

Ray went over him fast with his left hand, unearthing a new model gun, such as few prospectors ever carried, out of his shirt front. Grimly he stuck the weapon into a hip pocket. The prospector, surprisingly not protesting any more, climbed into the stage coach.

"Take care of him, boys," Ray said as the guards returned.

They did, binding his feet, then his hands. As a precaution against giving warning if he had any partners intending to jump the stage, he was gagged by twisting his ragged bandana through his mouth and knotting it behind his head.

The desert stretched for miles through the night into which endlessly the road disappeared. When eventually the dark line of the rim began to rise, Ray returned to being as alert as possible. Since the flaming arrow had been shot on the west side in the past, he almost missed it on the east. Catching only the last descent of it, Ray nevertheless kept the stage teams going without pause. The ball of fire looked eery in the silent greatness of the night. Now he knew it to be a signal in a well organized scheme, either for men to dismount at this point, or that the road was clear to do so. Perhaps both.

This time there would be no action after the signal, so what would be the following move of the conspirators in their mysterious business? Ray had an idea it would be a foray to see what had miscarried.

The sun was up and shining on a new day when the stage rolled into Towser. The metal box of money had been dispatched north with express directions for hand to hand delivery. Sure enough, already advised when it would arrive, the two business men who organized the bank were on hand. They stood before the new building accompanied by the marshal.

WHEN it was unloaded, heavy and cumbersome, Ray turned to the marshal to ask him to come along.

"Not until the money is taken care of," the officer replied.

"These four ought to be guards enough," Ray told him. "They'll take over for yuh."

The barn teamster was there. He

climbed to the box with instructions from Ray. The marshal stepped up and into the stage, his eyes coming to immediate rest on the gagged prisoner.

"Who's he?"

"A man you and me are goin' to palaver with shortly."

"Yeah? Say, I got news for yuh. After yuh talked about the old ranch below the rim, I went down there. Found two young fellers livin' on it. Brothers, and they sure looked a lot alike. Must be three altogether though, for I seen that many saddles and hosses."

The stage drew up before the marshal's office. Ray unbound the prisoner's feet so he could walk inside with them. Ray sat down in a chair. One hand snapped suddenly to the prisoner's sleeve cuff. A ripping sound filled the room. Behind it the right forearm was exposed.

"See?" Ray drawled lazily, satisfied. "The tightness of the skin over that wrist don't go with the beard this yahoo is wearin'."

His fingers unfastened the gag, and took it off. The prisoner started working his cramped jaw. Ray's fingers went into that beard. Catching a corner, he yanked. The whole mass of whiskers came off to expose a clean-shaven, youthful curved face.

The marshal came up on his feet astonished, mouth sagging open.

"Why, he's one of the brothers I see at the old deserted ranch!" he cried.

"I ain't surprised," Ray told him. "This same fellow passes hisself off as a pretty fair woman too. Except he sure don't walk like one!"

The prisoner's eyes kindled with light. He even chuckled.

"One of them drummers took a shine to me in yore stage!" he said.

"Uh-huh, well, this is it, I expect," Ray told him. "Game's over."

"What do yuh mean?" the other retorted. "Yuh ain't got no evidence of a crime and yuh got to turn me loose. They ain't no law says I can't wear a disguise if I want to!"

Ray considered him carefully. He didn't need to ask, he thought, the disguise that had been used for snooping around both Towser and Pioche. A raggied old prospector would get little attention wherever he moved. The girl trick had been so good as to be an Anton Huckery special. That outlaw had gotten away with it down south.

The marshal considered him hopefully, waiting for an indication of the charges. If Ray didn't have something definite, the youth would have to be released.

Two men came in from the sides of the door. They had slipped up quietly. The first through went to the right. A young cowboy almost identical in looks with the prisoner, though a year or more older. The second was middle-aged. On his seamed, nut browned face all the viciousness of the hootowl trails.

"Hi, Huckery!" Ray exclaimed. "I ain't surprised yuh showed up behind this funny business."

The outlaw snarled as he whirled. Both had come in with their guns leveled. The speech caused him to pause while he took the second look at Ray. Which proved his costly error. Ray snaked his gun from leather and fired as it snapped to position.

HUCKERY lost his six-gun without letting the hammer back. He fell against the close front wall, straightened a bit and landed sitting down.

The marshal had gone for his shooting iron with the shot. Concussion shook the small office as Ray wheeled on his feet to assume new position. No need, for the marshal's bullet took the gun from the hand of the other man. He stood wounded, holding broken fingers against his middle with his good hand.

Ray walked over to look down at Huckery sitting with the blood oozing from his left side. The hole wasn't too far over toward his spine to be fatal. Likely he would recover soon enough to take a big stretch in the pen.

"So they had to send for yuh," Huckery got from between teeth clenched in pain. "The boys claimed a new driver was hangin' around this time. I should of looked into it myself."

"Yuh missed a mighty rich haul last night," Ray told him, wanting to confirm his suspicion Huckery knew nothing about the shipment of money. "We brought in the funds for openin' the new bank."

THE startled, suddenly pained look in the wounded outlaw's eyes confirmed Ray's theory. Huckery's face took on an even darker color.

"What goes on?" the marshal asked. "I don't know what we've run into."

"Highgradin' gang, with Anton Huckery workin' on the outside," Ray replied. "Likely he organized it all the way. Him an' this pair was pick-up men after the thieves got loose from it." He turned back to Huckery. "Whereabouts on my stage have yore highgraders been hidin' it so's one of yuh could hop aboard, on some excuse, to recover it?"

A second time Huckery looked startled. Ray wasn't onto the entire scheme, the outlaw could see. His glance turned to craft.

"Wouldn't yuh like to know!"

At sounds outside, the marshal stirred fast on his feet. "Must be some more of the gang comin' at us!" he yelled to Ray, and jerked his holstered gun out.

As he spoke Ray heard riders halting at the very door of the office. Through a window Ray recognized Sheriff Mann. He called, "Hold it!" and relaxed.

Sheriff Mann walked in, his eyes blinking against the shadows after the bright morning sun. His deputy entered, started at sight of two wounded men and a prisoner. Mann stared at Huckery. "Well, I'll be dad-burned!" Sheriff Mann cried. "Ray, yuh likely got the varmints we're after."

"How?"

This time he discovered the loss had been so great the placer mine superintendent let Sheriff Mann handle the case his own way. The highgraders had to be among the clean-up men. He had grabbed all such employes and gone to work.

"Finally got one to squall," he explained nonchalantly. "Gave the whole thing away. Ray," his eyes kindled humorously, "yuh been haulin' it on the stage for them!"

"Figured as much awhile back. Tell me how."

"The loot had to be got rid of fast. It was. One of the inside gang would hustle into town, put it aboard the stage secretly and tip off a bartender. Word passed and the outside men took on from there."

The flaming arrow obviously then had been the signal for leaving the stage. It indicated the horses would be brought up for the one of the gang who had come aboard and recovered the loot. Where could it have been concealed?

"Yuh got me there," Sheriff Mann admitted. "The squealer didn't know none of the details of that. Their main job over there was to grab the gold."

Since the last highgrade gold taken should be still on the stage, Ray expected to find it. He motioned for Sheriff Mann to accompany him. They walked toward the stage barn.

"I declare, it wasn't spookin' the driver they was after all along," Sheriff Mann puzzled out. "They meant business, holdin' on to the gold."

Remembering the way Sheriff Mann considered him so oddly when he told of that first business, Ray said:

"Yuh even thought I was balmy in the head when I told about passengers disappearin' off the stage and balls of fire in the air."

Sheriff Mann grinned with embarrassment. "Yep. Sure did."

"And all the time these boys had a reason for everything they done. Had I suspicioned Huckery behind it, I'd of known that all along. Up until now it's been touch and go figurin'. I always did say Huckery was mighty smooth!"

At the barn they went over the outside of the unhooked stage. Even the rack in back disclosed nothing.

"Has to be inside," Ray put his theory in words. "In no other way could it of been quick and easy got at!"

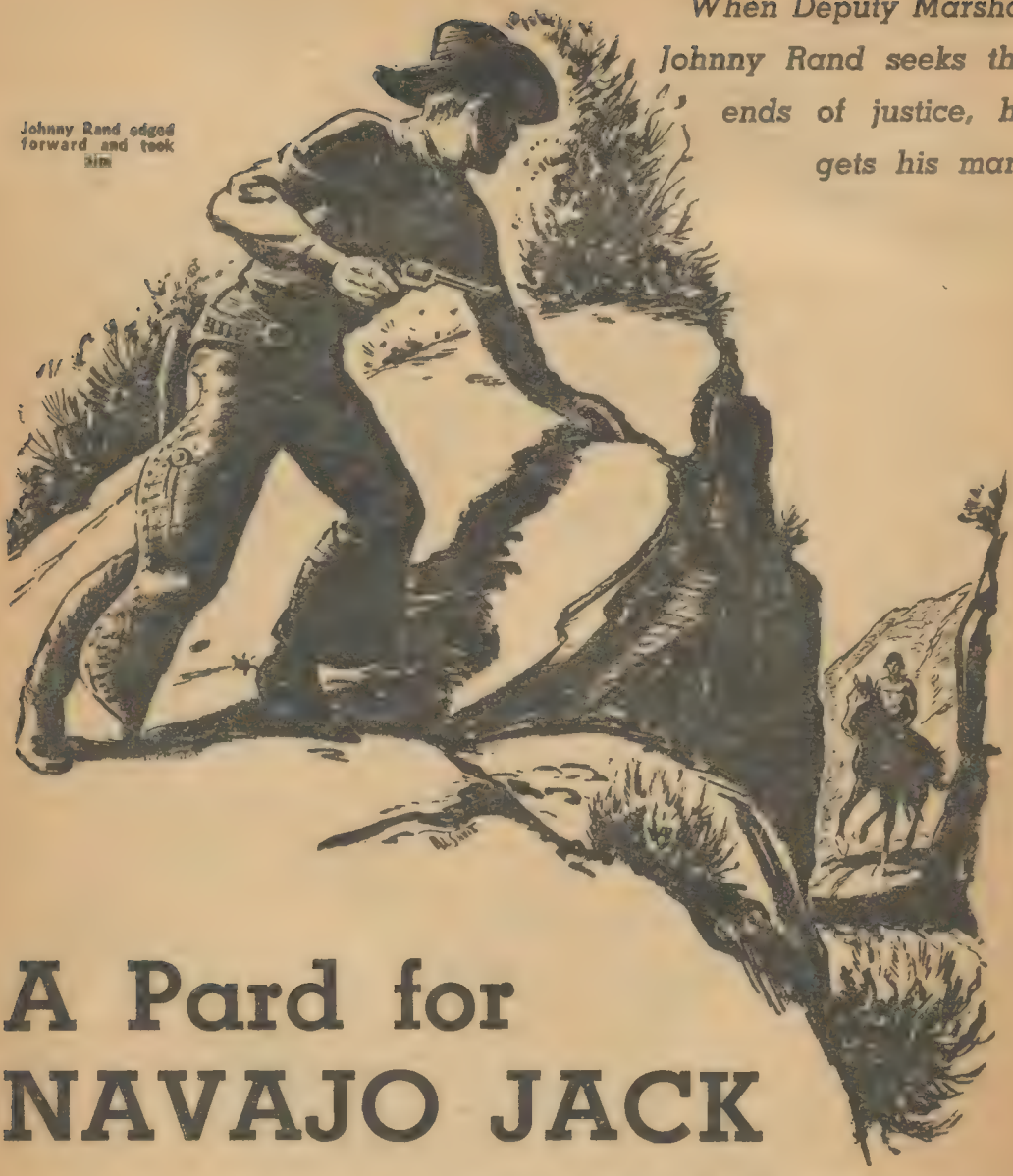
Remembering the wounded deputy impersonator and the one in the woman's clothing had been on the rear seat, Ray tried the thin coverings. Nothing. He pulled out the corner of the back pad against the end of the coach, took a look and motioned.

Sheriff Mann moved in beside him, his eyes bugging to stems. A small wooden box had been fitted down under the seat back against the wall, accessible for a hand pushed behind the leather faced pad. In it nestled two leather pokes.

"Dog-gone!" Sheriff Mann exclaimed.

"Well, this one ends, but I must say its been mighty amusin' to work out," Ray drawled. "Queerest case I been put onto yet!"

When Deputy Marshal Johnny Rand seeks the ends of justice, he gets his man!



Johnny Rand edged forward and took him

A Pard for NAVAJO JACK

by Paul S. Powers

TUCSON" Johnny had the drop, but he wormed closer to the mesquite-bordered trail to improve on it. He knew that he might have to shoot. If so, it would be best to shoot to kill. "Never take chances with a murderer" was the first axiom that had been laid down for him after his appointment as a deputy U.S. marshal, and Johnny Rand had been one long enough to know that it was a good rule. If the Navajo didn't get his hands up fast he'd blast him out of the saddle.

The wiry little deputy marshal was

playing a lone game. Somewhere in this lava mountain country a sheriff's posse was scouring the canyons for "Navajo Jack," but as usual, Tuscon Johnny Rand was on his own. Once again he had won, and there was a grin on Johnny's freckled face as he edged forward on a brush-concealed boulder that flanked the trail. Yes, he'd won, and to outguess an Indian in his own stamping grounds was a thing that took some doing!

Johnny hadn't his carbine with him this trip, but his Colt .45 would do just as well at this distance; and if it came down to cases the short gun had greater stopping power. He rocked back the hammer with the calloused joint of a practiced thumb, waiting for his quarry to ride into his ambush.

Navajo Jack was already within a hundred yards of the waiting gun-muzzle, coming along on his pony at an easy lope. Tall, slender and straight in the saddle, he was a handsome figure in spite of the nondescript buckskin clothes he wore. As he came closer, Johnny could see his black, crow's-wing hair, held only by a beaded head-band, waving in the breeze, and he caught the gleam of the half-breed's eyes. They were gray—surprising eyes in so dark a face.

The Indian had no chance for escape. There was no likelihood of the pony scenting the deputy's horse, Johnny had taken account of the wind. On his hands and knees, he wriggled forward a few feet more. Then, just as he was about to sing out "Hands up!" there was a sudden, sharp whirring sound—and a hidden rattlesnake struck Johnny on the right wrist.

The surprise, more than the pain of it, loosened Johnny's hold on his six-gun. It jumped out of his hand, slid down the steep slope in a little cloud of dust and landed almost at the feet of the killer's cayuse. The rattler, a big, dust-colored specimen, went slithering away into a clump of pear. It had done its work.

Tucson Johnny glanced at his wrist and at the two blue puncture marks, and then he started down the bank after his gun. He was doomed, anyway, more than likely, and there was a chance that he could recover his weapon before the other man could act. Better to die quickly than from the slow horror of snake-bite.

But Navajo Jack was not startled into helplessness. In a twinkling he had covered Johnny with his six-shooter. Then he jumped lightly from the saddle, picked up the deputy marshal's .45 and thrust it into the waistband of his buckskin pants without taking his steely eyes —or his gun muzzle—from Tucson Johnny.

"Well, I reckon yuh win the trick," admitted the sawed-off young officer.

HE was a little astonished because the tall Indian hadn't instantly shot him down. But maybe it was Navajo Jack's purpose to play with him first, as a cat does before killing its prey.

"Who you? You sheriff's man?" demanded the Navajo in good but halting English. Possibly he had heard the buzzing of the rattlesnake, for his glance passed from Johnny's pale, sweating face down to his rapidly swelling hand. "Snake bite you?"

His fingers aching and his arm numbed nearly to his shoulder, Tucson Johnny sank to a sitting position at the edge of the trail. His legs had begun to shake under him and he felt a dizzy emptiness that seemed to center at the pit of his stomach.

"Yuh guessed it, Navajo," he said wryly. "Why don't yuh finish me? Or would yuh rather watch me curl up?"

The Indian's face was stolid and expressionless, except for his eyes which had lighted with a kindly, sympathetic glow.

"You sit quiet, and I help you, Navajo way," he promised, as he holstered his six-gun.

Maybe Tucson Johnny was already light-headed, for he heard himself saying, "I'm a law man—Uncle Sam's law, savvy? If I get well, I'll see yuh hung. So yuh'd better . . ."

Things went black then. The next thing he knew he was sprawled at full length in the meager shade of a creosote bush. Navajo Jack must have used the most approved white man's methods, as well as Indian, for Johnny's wrist had been cut open with a knife and the wound was still bleeding.

The Navajo had made a small fire and was brewing a concoction of some desert plants in a little blackened kettle. When

it had cooled he made a poultice with the herbs and applied it to Johnny's wrist. Then he insisted that the sick man drink the broth. Wonderingly, the deputy gulped the bitter brew. After that he slept again.

It was night, and the stars were out, when Tucson Johnny awoke to find himself not only still alive but feeling surprisingly well. The pain had ceased, and while his arm was a bit stiff all the swelling had gone. He was able to sit up and make himself a cigarette. The fire was still small, but it was burning brightly and the Navajo was silently feeding it greasewood.

"How are you now, Uncle Sam law man?" the half-breed asked unsmilingly when he saw that his patient—and prisoner—had awakened. He reached out with a long arm and lighted the cigarette with a blazing twig.

"I'm *bueno*," Johnny admitted. "Dunno why yuh done it—but thanks, anyhow. Yuh saved my life, I guess."

The Indian nodded. "It was bad snake. Very big. I find him and kill him."

"Well, did yuh now?" returned the deputy marshal with an Irish smile. "I'd think yuh'd be more friendly toward that buzztail, Navajo. If it hadn't been for him you'd be back in Chollaville jail by this time."

The outlaw's gray eyes seemed perplexed. "Navajo not guilty," he said earnestly, tapping his chest. "Evidence circumstantial, as white law talker say."

"The law talkers—I guess yuh mean lawyers—say that circumstantial evidence can be stronger than the direct kind," said Tucson Johnny, dragging on his brown cigarette. "And I plumb agree. A witness can lie, but not facts."

"Navajo not guilty," the Indian repeated firmly. "Navajo innocent."

The deputy U.S. marshal shrugged skeptically. "Well, what's yore story?" he asked.

The words and manner of the fugitive might have carried conviction to a mind less astute than his listener's. His story started off sincerely enough, but Tucson Johnny had heard some fluent and convincing lying in his day, and he wasn't much impressed.

"I drink much firewater that night in Chollaville," said Navajo Jack. "Whisky not good for Indian. Pretty soon I want to quit firewater, but white men laugh, buy me more. One of men is sheriff's deputy. I get very drunk. In alley I go to sleep, and by'm'by deputy wake me up and kick me plenty. Say I rob stage station. A lie. One of moccasins is gone. Deputy sheriff say he found it in stage station office. Circumstantial evidence, judge say. No good."

"Yuh could have tapped the station till while yuh were too drunk to savvy what yuh were doin', Jack," Tucson Johnny said bluntly. "Which deputy arrested yuh, Craig or Sturm?"

"Man name Craig," said Navajo Jack.

"A good officer, I hear. And he did right," Johnny said grimly. "But it ain't that robbery that's goin' to stretch yore neck, Jack—it's murder. Yuh made yore mistake when you killed a man while breakin' jail."

FOR the first time, the Indian's swarthy face changed expression. The gaunt muscles twitched around his straight mouth, and his eyes opened very wide.

"You mean old man? Sheriff deputy name Sturm?" the fugitive questioned. "I hit him with fist, yes, when he bring me supper. Mebbe so, pretty hard, but not to kill him. I grab keys, take gun with me when I run away from jail. Old Sturm die?"

"Yes, with a bullet through his heart," said Johnny bleakly. "Yuh got his gun, all right, and yuh killed him with it before yuh hit the owlhoot trail. Now go ahead and treat me the same way—that's what yuh intend, ain't it?"

Navajo Jack was silent, staring into the red embers of the fire for a long time. Then he reached into the shadows and brought out Johnny's own bed-roll. For the first time the deputy marshal noticed that his own horse was tethered near the Navajo's smaller pony. Jack had evidently found the animal and led him into camp while his "guest" had been unconscious.

"You sleep now," said the Indian as he spread out the soogans and blanket. "In morning you will be well from snake."

Tucson Johnny didn't know whether it was an invitation or a command, but he was weak and tired so he rolled up in the covers, grateful to be alive, but wondering how long he would remain that

way. It was creepy, this being at the mercy of a renegade Indian's whim.

Navajo Jack didn't intend to sleep, that was evident. He hunkered down a few paces from the deputy marshal, his beady eyes shining like glass in the starlight.

"The posse will get yuh shore, Jack," Johnny said to him. "Where were yuh headed for, anyway, when me and that rattler buzzed into yore life?"

The Navajo's white teeth gleamed in his first happy smile. "I go to see Running Fawn. In Flagstaff town. She is beautiful, and I will marry her in white man's church. That is why Navajo Jack leave jail."

"It's too bad about that circumstantial evidence," Johnny muttered as he dozed off. . . .

The sun in his face roused Johnny Rand from as good a night's sleep as he'd ever had. The Indian's medicine, plus his own rugged vitality, seemed to have whipped the rattlesnake poison, for aside from a sore wrist and hand he felt in great shape. And he was hungry! Navajo Jack was making coffee, and the smell of it rolled Johnny out of his blanket.

"What's for breakfast, Jack?" he sang out, knowing that there wasn't an ounce of grub in his own outfit and hoping that his companion was well supplied.

The Indian said that he had a bag of sourdough biscuits in his outfit and he went to get it. His back was turned for only a minute, but during that time Johnny weighed the possibility of making a dash to escape. It didn't seem favorable, for Navajo Jack had both their revolvers, and Johnny knew he had a quick eye. And then, too, he wasn't sure just how much of a prisoner he was! What did this mysterious Indian intend to do with him?

Navajo Jack came back looking very stern. "Somebody come in night," he said. "Somebody steal biscuits. Now we go hungry."

Johnny stared at him. "Why, that's impossible! Who'd do a thing like that?" he demanded. "Yuh shore it wasn't a pack-rat?"

The Indian strode toward Johnny's bedroll, looking down at it with a curiosity that soon changed to anger. He whirled on Johnny.

[*Turn page*]

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"Why you steal my grub?" he accused.

"What yuh talkin' about?" Johnny rasped back at him. "I never took yore biscuits, and if yuh say I did—"

Then his pugnacious jaw sagged. His glance had followed the forefinger of Navajo Jack. Scattered over the bedding and on the sand beside it were indubitable biscuit crumbs.

"You get up in night and eat grub," the Indian accused again.

"I did no such thing, dang it!" yelped Tucson Johnny. "I don't walk in my sleep, and I'm so hungry right this minute I—"

"Evidence circumstantial," the Navajo grunted.

Then, while the dumfounded deputy marshal blinked at him, the Indian began to roar with laughter. Johnny had never heard an Indian laugh like that, and pretty soon, although the joke was on him, he was laughing just as hard himself.

AFTERWARD, Navajo Jack brought out his sack of biscuits, and the two men made a big breakfast out of them, washing them down with gulps of strong, black coffee. Tucson Johnny wasn't fooling when he told his companion that the meal tasted better than any he'd eaten for a month.

"Yuh shore had me guessin' for a while, Jack," he said with a grin while they were breaking camp. "I was beginnin' to think I was really guilty when I saw that evidence yuh had planted. Now where are we goin', *amigo*? Where do yuh aim to take me?"

The fugitive was climbing aboard his cayuse. "Not taking you," he said, his gray eyes smiling. "You ride with Navajo a little way, then go where you please, except way I go."

Tucson Johnny mounted his own horse, settled himself in the saddle, and rolled and lighted a quirly. As he was an honest officer, he knew that just as soon as Navajo Jack gave him the opportunity he would get right back on his trail and capture him as quickly as possible. He didn't like the prospect. Not only had Jack saved his life, but more important in Johnny's code, he liked the man. Duty, however, came before anything else.

Riding almost knee to knee, they took their horse up to the trail and turned northward. A few minutes later, just as they were entering a thicket of mesquite trees hardly a mile from their camping place, a dozen men with leveled guns swept out at them.

"Stick 'em up, Navajo!" a voice yammered. "We got yuh covered, yuh sneakin' murderer! Don't make a move!"

It was the posse from Chollaville. Tucson Johnny recognized Sheriff Frank Haywood, a big, white-haired, red-faced hombre, as well as some others who were in the party. He was sorry for the Navajo, but at the same time glad that the man's misfortune was due to others and not to himself. Jack made no resistance when he saw that his escape was cut off. He was yanked from his pony and roughly disarmed.

"He's got two guns on him," said a member of the posse. "Here, Sheriff, you take charge of 'em."

Haywood was looking at Tucson Johnny and chuckling until his fat sides quivered. "Well, well, if it ain't our friend from the Fed'ral gov'ment," he said jokingly.

Johnny grinned. "Howdy, Sheriff."

"So yuh thought yuh'd ride separate from us, huh, and catch the Injun all by yore lonesome? Looks plumb like he caught *you!*"

The posse had a good laugh over it, but the deputy marshal didn't mind, and the wide smile never left his good-natured, freckled face. He didn't have much to say about his experience, although the men fired plenty of questions at him. Navajo Jack was stolidly silent while he was being roped to his saddle, but he caught Johnny's eye with a mournful look. Probably he was thinking of Running Fawn rather than the hang-rope, Johnny opined.

"I reckon one of these six-shooters we took from that killer belongs to you, Rand," the sheriff chortled, as the party was preparing to head back toward Chollaville. "Is this one yores?" He tossed one of the .45s to Johnny.

The deputy marshal started to say no as he glanced at the weapon that Haywood had passed to him. Then, examining the gun more closely, he muttered, "Thanks, Sheriff," and carefully shoved the .45 down into his empty holster.

With the rattling of bits and the thudding of many hoofs the posse got under way. Navajo Jack rode in the center,

and Tucson Johnny up front with Haywood and Deputy Sheriff Bill Craig.

"It's a wonder that Injun didn't slaughter yuh," Deputy Craig said sympathetically. "I reckon he was goin' to make a sort of hostage out of yuh—use yuh for a shield. Well, he'll play no more tricks; we don't fool with his kind in Chollaville. He'll hang within forty-eight hours."

"It was you that found old Sturm's body, wasn't it?" asked Tucson Johnny Rand.

The deputy sheriff nodded glumly. "I'd known Harve Sturm for twenty years. He was my best friend. So yuh can savvy how I feel about that blasted Injun."

"He says he only slugged Sturm," Johnny said.

Bill Craig laughed scornfully. He was a powerfully built man in his late thirties, sporting range clothes rather better than most of the others. Under his wide hat his blond hair was long and curling.

"Slugged him with a bullet right through the ticker," he growled. "Sturm was takin' his turn as night jailer, and it just so happened that I dropped in at the calaboose about midnight—thought I'd play some cards with my old friend. I found Sturm dead, the doors open and the Injun gone. I ran and routed out the sheriff then, and you know the rest."

Johnny rolled a cigarette, and during the rest of the long ride to Chollaville he was thoughtful and silent. . . .

TUCSON JOHNNY crossed the plaza in Chollaville and walked along the lonely side-street that led up to the courthouse, a square, gloomy building of stone and adobe. The upper story was dark, but barred oblongs of yellow lamplight marked the jail where the death watch was being kept. Navajo Jack was to hang the next morning.

It was a balmy night, with the smell of mesquite in the air and a moon riding high. Johnny entered the building and walked down the dim hallway to the sheriff's office. It was dark and deserted; the deputy marshal had purposely come an hour early to the midnight appointment he had made there with Haywood.

Whistling under his breath, he passed on through another passageway at the end of which was a heavy door. Light

[*Turn page*]

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streamed through the grating that covered the small peep-hole. He rapped, calling out Craig's name, and presently a key grated in the lock and the door swung open to admit him.

"Well, Marshal, this is quite a surprise, seein' yuh this late," greeted the yellow-haired deputy sheriff.

"I thought I'd drop in and hold some palaver with yuh, Craig," Johnny said, smiling.

"That's right nice of yuh, Rand. Make yoreself at home."

It was a sort of guard-room, a narrow space furnished with a table and a few chairs, with the outer stone wall on one side, and the bars of the jail stretching from floor to ceiling on the other. Beyond this steel barrier Navajo Jack was pacing back and forth, slowly and lightfootedly, like a great cat. His dark face lit up at the sight of Johnny, but Jack's gray eyes were brooding with despair. He had lost hope. There would never be a "Flagstaff town" for him.

"Hello, John-nee," he called from between the bars, but the freckled little marshal did not acknowledge his greeting.

Johnny was making himself agreeable to Deputy Sheriff Craig. There was a deck of solitaire on the table, and he asked if Craig would like to play something more congenial.

"How about some hands of pitch?" agreed the sheriff's deputy, sitting down and beginning to shuffle the cards.

"*Bueno*," nodded Tucson Johnny.

They played for a while, first one winning then the other. Navajo Jack, with nothing else to do, watched the game through the bars.

Again and again the deal went back and forth. Finally, Bill Craig chuckled triumphantly over an especially good round.

"High, low, jack," he said, counting his point, "and the game."

"Yore game is all run out, Craig," Johnny said softly. "And yuh've lost it."

"What do yuh mean? Are yuh loco?"

"I'll tell yuh what I mean, Craig," drawled the deputy U.S. marshal. "I've been to see old Sturm's widow. . . . I notice that yore hands are on the table, Craig," he added, when the man started violently. "Keep 'em there where I can see 'em, while I tell yuh what Mrs. Sturm had to say."

Craig's face had turned a sickly saffron color in the lamplight. "The old lady must be out of her head if she said anything about me," he snarled. "Spill it, Rand."

"Sturm was an easy-goin' old duffer, wasn't he? Not the kind who could keep a secret very long from his wife?" Johnny grinned. "So if he knew that another deputy sheriff had robbed the stage office and laid the blame on a drunken Indian—"

Bill Craig's mud-colored eyes were dilated with rage and fear. But he was holding himself under control.

"Lies," he rasped. "All lies—either you, or her."

"You guessed that Harve Sturm knew what yuh'd done," Johnny went on relentlessly. "So when yuh came in here that night after the Indian's escape and saw Sturm senseless on the floor—keep yore hand on the table, Craig!—when yuh saw that, yuh thought yuh'd stop Sturm's mouth for keeps, with the Navajo gettin' the blame again. So yuh shot him, waited a little while, and then gave the alarm. Isn't that it, Craig?"

"Yuh can't prove it! Nobody can prove a thing!" the deputy sheriff shouted. "My word's as good as anyone else's!"

"Yuh're wrong," Johnny told him calmly. "I've got proof that will release the Navajo and hang you higher than a kite."

Craig knew Johnny's reputation with a gun, but he was desperate. With a snarled oath, he pushed back from the table, hand clawing at his holstered .45.

INSTEAD of reaching for his own weapon, Tucson Johnny sent his wiry body hurtling forward into Craig's, at the same instant gripping the man's right wrist with his left hand. The freckled deputy was a head shorter than Craig and much lighter, but the speed and muscle behind his charge knocked the bigger man off balance. They went to the floor together, fighting with the ferocity of timberwolves.

Johnny's right hand was still sore and swollen from the effects of the snakebite, but he forgot all about that now as he sent it thudding first into Craig's jaw, then into his ribs.

The deputy marshal could hear Navajo Jack's excited cries. "John-nee! Hit him

plenty more, John-nee!" And he was doing just that! At the same time he was clinging stubbornly to Craig's gun arm, twisting it and trying to wrench the .45 from the man's frenzied fingers.

He succeeded, finally, after the two of them had rolled the length of the room. But as the gun came loose it exploded in a flash of flame and thunder. Johnny was scorched by the burning powder, but Craig got more than that. He screamed profanely, rolling limply over on his side.

Sheriff Haywood came bursting in a few moments afterward. He'd heard the noise of the fight and had hurried over, breathless and excited.

"What the devil's been coming off here!" he yelped at Johnny. He seemed relieved at seeing Navajo Jack still behind the bars, but his first act was to bend over the writhing form of his deputy. "Are yuh bad hurt, Craig?"

"He's got a slug in his leg, that's all." Johnny Rand's grin was sardonic. He walked over to the groaning deputy sheriff. "How about it, *hombre*? Haven't yuh got something to tell yore boss?"

Craig lifted a sweaty face, moistening his battered lips with his tongue. "All right. I done it—I killed old Sturm, like yuh said," he said thickly. "If his wife talked, I might as well come clean."

The sheriff's eyes were bulging with amazement. "Good heavens!" he gasped.

But Tucson Johnny laughed mirthlessly. "I didn't say that the widow accused yuh, Craig. She hasn't talked—yet. She's been too afraid of yuh. But now, when she knows yuh can't harm her, she might have interestin' things to say."

Craig tried to welch on his confession. "If I said anything just now, I must have been out of my head," he whined at the sheriff.

Haywood turned a puzzled face to Johnny. "What kind of supporting evidence have you got, Marshal Rand?"

"Evidence circumstantial, as Navajo Jack would say." Johnny grinned at the Indian, then turned back to Haywood. "Did you bring along Harve Sturm's gun, as I asked you to?"

The sheriff produced it. "Yes, here it is," he said. "The one that the Injun killed him with, and that we took from him when he was captured."

"No, it isn't. That's my gun," Johnny

[*Turn page*]

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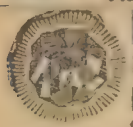

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said crisply. "I can give yuh the number and identifyin' marks." He drew a Colt .45 from his holster and handed it to Haywood. "This is the gun that Navajo Jack took from Sturm after he'd knocked him out. Sturm's initials are scratched on the handle."

"By gannies, yuh're right!" Haywood cried. "I remember this old hogleg!"

"Look at it," Tucson Johnny insisted calmly. "That gun hasn't been fired in months, prob'ly not in years. All six of the ca'tridges in the cylinder are corroded in so tight that yuh'd have to hammer the ejector to get 'em out."

"The Injun couldn't have killed Sturm with this gun," Haywood admitted. "Why didn't you say somethin' before, Marshal Rand?"

"The Navajo's trial was a farce," Johnny said. "Everyone was too bitter and excited yesterday when he was sentenced, so I kept this gun as a hole card. That's why I tried not to use it when Sturm jumped me—it would have been a shame to have shot away my evidence."

Navajo Jack's jaw was agape with incredulous disbelief. Johnny chuckled, reached through the bars and gripped the Indian's big, coppery hand.

"I've about paid yuh back, *amigo*, but not quite," he told the Navajo.

"Paid Jack plenty," the Indian said. "What you mean, John-nee, not quite?"

"When yuh get out tomorrow," promised Tucson Johnny, "I'm ridin' along with yuh to Flagstaff. Yore weddin' to Runnin' Fawn is goin' to be in ace-high white man's style, and I'm goin' to keep yuh away from firewater until the girl has got yuh under her thumb! I've always wanted to be best man at a weddin'."

"No savvy thumb," said Navajo Jack.

"You will," grinned Tucson Johnny. "You will—pardner."

Answers to Questions on Page 81

1. Wayne Brazel killed Pat Garrett, who killed Billy the Kid.

2. It comes from the Indian word *tehas*, meaning "friend." Since the letter x in Spanish is pronounced as an h, the Mexicans gave it its present spelling.

3. Going to his own funeral.

4 (1) The Mormon or Beehive State (2) The Lone Star State. (3) The Sooner State.

5. Muleys are natural hornless cattle. Some breeds, such as the Aberdeen-Angus are all muleys, but they occasionally appear in all other horned breeds.

THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 7)

barreled shot-gun and was lookin' for Clay to arrest him. Seein' the two brothers together, he ordered 'em both to surrender.

They went for their guns instead, and the Marshal fired one barrel of his gun at John, woundin' his side and one arm. Bullets from the Allison brothers' guns hit the Marshal in vital spots, and he died instantly. Again the Allisons escaped justice at the hands o' the law.

Not long after that, just as soon as his wounds were healed, in fact, John Allison joined up with the Ike Stockton gang o' outlaws in Colorado.

The next year he was back in New Mexico, and wrote his brother Clay, then in Fort Elliot, Texas, that he was in trouble and needed his help.

Clay had no sooner received the message than he saddled up his favorite saddle horse —a handsome black—and set out to cover the several hundred miles between him and John. When he arrived in New Mexico he found that his brother had killed two outlaws and was bein' tried for murder.

As always, Clay Allison succeeded in gettin his brother cleared o' the charges. I reckon the fact that the two dead men were outlaws and known killers theirselves had weight in John's favor. This, regardless o' the truth that John Allison was hisself a member o' a outlaw gang and a killer, too. Yep, Clay Allison had a way with the law.

He Loved a Fight

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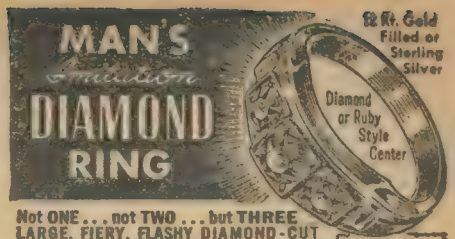
[*Turn page*]



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that at the appointed hour they would each ride to the top o' the hill, openin' fire with their pistols on sight. The fight was to continue until one or both were dead.

Duel by Proxy

Seems Allison's friend began to get plumb nervous as the hour for the duel neared. This old cowboy had a crippled hand, and realized, as his temper cooled, that his chances wan't so good as they might be.

Well, Clay Allison, always plenty sure o' hisself, and probably spoilin' for another killin', offered to take the cripple-handed cowboy's place in the duel.

"You stay here in camp," he ordered, "and I'll fight this duel in yore place. And keep it a secret!"

So the cowboy-friend stayed behind in camp and watched nervously when, at the appointed hour, Clay Allison mounted his horse and started ridin' up the little hill. Now both heads o' the duellists appeared over the top o' the hill from opposite sides at the same instant. But the cowboy from the rival camp recognized Clay Allison in that split second.

He jerked his horse around and flew, hell-for-leather, back down the hill to his own camp. That was the end o' the proposed duel.

An Unromantic Finish

Yet the cock-sure, darin' Clay Allison died in a very unromantic way, without any glory attendin' his last moments on this earth. He had settled in Seven Rivers, Colorado, at the time. Late one night he'd been on a spree in a saloon, and was sleeping it off. A friend undertook to haul him to his ranch home in a wagon drawn by a bronc and a pair of mules.

On the drive home Allison woke up and took the situation in promptly. He decided to do the drivin' and demanded the lines from his friend. Now Clay Allison was proud o' his prowess as a mule skinner.

"I'll show you how to drive a team," he boasted, and started applyin' the whip. Well, that bronc was skittish, and in no time at all the team bolted in a crazy runaway. Allison was thrown from the seat of the careenin' wagon, fallin' under the wheels. His neck was broken then and there.

And that, fellahs and gals, was the end o'

one of the most darin' "bad" cowboys o' the old frontier.

So long, and lots o' luck, ever'body, 'till next month comes rollin' around!

Buck Benson

OUR NEXT ISSUE

SOME corking good yarns coming up in the next issue, folks. Novelets by Louis L'Amour, Syl MacDowell and Allan K. Echols, whose stories have proved so popular with readers of THRILLING WESTERN in the past. And a host of colorful, bullet-studded short stories by authors well known to all readers of Western magazines.

The issue will lead off with a gripping yarn by Louis L'Amour in which a young man named Barry Merrano finds himself an outcast among the ranchers of Mirror Valley. Called MERRANO OF THE DRY COUNTRY, we think you'll find it a tale hard to forget.

But what better way of previewing this grand novelet than by giving you a passage from the story's opening as you'll find it in next month's issue of THRILLING WESTERN? So here it is:

Barry Merrano had never realized that hatred could become almost a tangible thing, but he could feel it now, pushing against him as he stood at the counter, waiting. Hard-jawed Tom Drake, owner of the huge TD brand, once the wealthiest man in all the Mirror Valley country, who wouldn't even glance his way. Jim Hill, the first rancher to settle in Mirror Valley, and Joe Stangle from the head of the valley, none would look at him.

When the old storekeeper finally walked over to him, the man's face was stiff, but Barry thought he saw a gentle gleam in the man's eyes. Quietly, he gave his order. Several times the other ranchers glanced his way, for he was ordering things that few of them could afford to buy.

"This will have to be cash." The storekeeper's voice sounded unhappy. "What with the drouth and all, money's short."

For a moment, bitterness welled up inside Barry and he had a half notion to bring the whole thing crashing around their ears by asking how long it had been since Tom Drake paid cash. He knew what it would mean. For the first time they would be faced with the cruel reality that they were broke. The Mirror Valley country was broke flat.

As soon as the feeling came, it passed away.

[*Turn page*]

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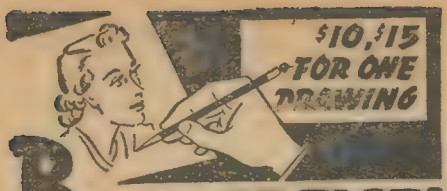

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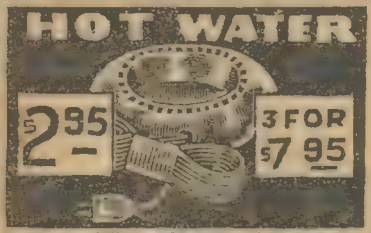

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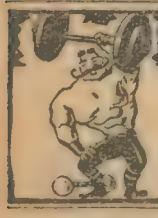

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He had no desire for even that revenge. They hated him, and he knew they hated him.

They hated him because he was the son of Miguel Merrano, the Mexican rider who married the most beautiful girl in the valley. They hated him because he had the audacity to return after they had driven his father out. They hated him because when they built a fence to keep his cattle from Willow Springs, he had found water elsewhere and then had kept the fence up himself.

They hated him because he had defied them and succeeded in getting along, and because he had warned them that they were ruining their land, that drouth would come. They hated him because the drouth had come and their cattle were dying by hundreds. Soon they would be dying by thousands for want of water and grass.

"That's all right," he said quietly. "I understand, and I can pay."

He got his order and paid for it in gold, three gold pieces which he placed carefully on the counter, and Joe Stangle looked up at him, his eyes hard.

"I'd like to know," he said,, "where a Mexican gets that kind of money. Maybe the sheriff could find out if he looked around."

Barry turned around, gathering up an armful of groceries. "Maybe he could," he said gently, "and maybe you could, too, Joe. All you'd have to do would be to use your eyes."

He walked out, then returned for more groceries, and while he made three more trips, they watched him.

"That father of yours must have knowed what he was doin' when he bought that land," Stangle said. His eyes were small and mean, and he had the name of being an irritable, trouble-making man.

"The land my father bought was the same sort of land you all have," Barry said evenly. "There was good grass on all this land once, but you overstocked yours and fed it out of existence. There's nothing wrong with your land a few good years of the right treatment won't cure."

"Ah!" Stangle snorted. "We heard all that preachin' before! No Mexican is goin' to come around and tell me how to run my range! Why, Jim Hill and I were runnin' stock before you was born!"

Merrano picked up another armful of groceries and turned without speaking. Stangle, his face suddenly white around the eyes in the intensity of his fury, stuck out his foot and Barry Merrano tripped and sprawled on the floor, his groceries scattering in every direction.

Nobody laughed. Tom Drake looked around quickly and impatiently, staring at Stangle, but he said nothing.

Slowly, Barry Merrano got off the floor. His face was very cold and still. His eyes lifted and he stared at Stangle for a long minute. Then he said slowly, "That was a cheap thing to do. A small thing. There's not much man in you, is there, Stangle?"

Had he slapped him, the effect would have been easier on Joe Stangle. The man trembled and his face turned gray and ugly. His hand dropped to his gun. . .

And so begins MERRANO OF THE DRY

COUNTRY. And when, as in the case of his father before him, the outcast Merrano attracts the loveliest girl in the valley, things really begin to pop. It's a story that will move you with its injustices, will make you mad and glad, and will keep you reading avidly right up until the very last word!

A second big novelet, HANGNOOSE TRAIL, by Allan K. Echols, concerns a man on the dodge from the law. If you like gun-blazing action and tight and gripping suspense, with some surprise twists that will jolt you to the socks, don't miss this one. It's Echols at his best.

Also in the next issue, another humorous novelet featuring those two ludicrous loafers, "Swap" Bootle and "Whopper" Whaley, who attract trouble with more ease than blackstrap sorghum attracts flies.

THE SCREWBEAN SLEETHERDER is the title of this hilarious yarn by Syl MacDowell, which finds Whopper by appalling error, taking off in a rainmaker's plane, the operation of which is a complete mystery to him. And as misadventure tends to lead to further misadventure, so does it in the case of THE SCREWBEAN SLEETHERDER. Some real deep-down laughs in this one, folks, take our word for it.

Then, of course, next month's THRILLING WESTERN will also contain the usual goodly supply of colorful, swiftly-paced short stories, plus special features. For some top-flight Western reading, be on hand.

LETTERS FROM READERS

THE more the merrier, we always say, so if you haven't yet dropped us a line, we urge you to do as your *compadres* below have done and let fly at us with pen, pencil, or typewriter. We really do enjoy hearing from you, and your letters tell us the type of stories you would best like to see in forthcoming issues of the magazine.

And now to a few excerpts from some of your many grand missives:

I have found few fiction magazines that interest me, much preferring fact articles to stories as a rule, but THRILLING WESTERN is an exception. The stories are readable and entertaining, a rare thing in this day wherein most contemporary fiction strains so hard for effect that it strains the reader. Keep your tales in that

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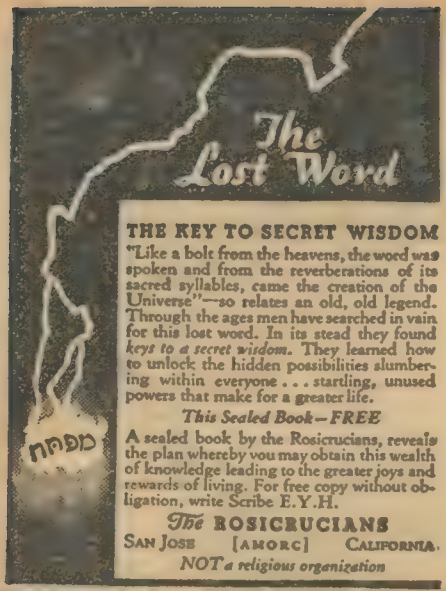

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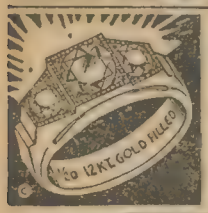

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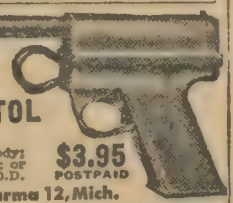

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good, natural tone and I'll keep reading 'em. —*Louis Armine, New Orleans, La.*

Thanks, Louis. Yours is a nice tribute indeed and we appreciate it.

I find THRILLING WESTERN a most exciting book and have no wish to miss so much as a solitary issue. Walt Slade, the very gallant gent who is so fast with a six-gun, is my favorite, of course. But I find the other stories first rate, too.—*A. E. Shiek, Port Shepstone, South Africa.*

Much obliged for your good letter, A. E. How's about hearing from more of you folks from other lands? Your reactions to our Western stories are mighty interesting.

I've been a reader of your magazine for several years and think the Swap and Whopper stories as funny as anything I've ever read anywhere. Though the other longer stories are usually a little grimmer than I would prefer, I do enjoy them, and I think most of the short stories are swell.—*Ed Connell, Toledo, Ohio.*

Some like 'em grim, some like 'em funny, Ed. Hence a little of this, a little of that.

Why not give Walt Slade a love interest? I

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like the stories about him as they are, of course, but think that this would make them even better. My only other suggestion is that you bring your magazine out twice a month, then I wouldn't have to wait so long for each new issue.—*Orpha Sedillo, Denver Colorado.*

Gracias, señorita. And as for the love interest, a gal would have quite a chore in keeping up with *El Halcon,* don't you think? As far, fast, and often as he travels, we figure it's best he has no apron strings to bind him.

Walt Slade stacks up pretty big down around the Border, but how would he do up among the real he-men of the West, the northerners, I sometimes wonder. Why not send him up amongst the Montana bearcats for an issue or two?—*Albie Sanderson, Helena, Montana.*

A Texas Ranger in Montana? Oh, come now, Albie. But send yore bearcats south and we'll see. There's plenty of Lone Star boys'll give you an argument as to the real he-men of the West, I'm afraid. Us, we're neutral.

I like most all Western magazines and have been reading them ever since I've been old enough to read, I guess. But *Thrilling Western* is my favorite, so don't change it.—*Faye Lloyd, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.*

Thanks, Faye, we'll do our best to keep it your favorite. Which about winds things up for this time, folks, but meanwhile let's hear from all of you. Simply address a letter or postcard to The Editor, THRILLING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y., and tell us what you think of the magazine. We'll appreciate it greatly. So long now until the next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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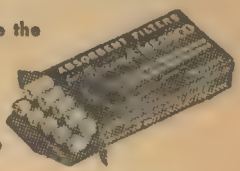

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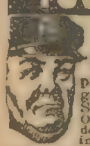
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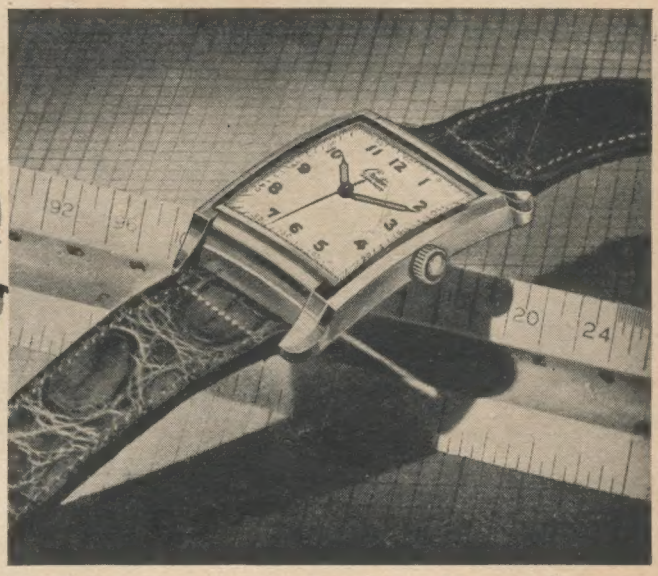

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